The London School of Economics and Political Science

After the American Dream: The Political Economy of Spirituality in Northern Arizona, USA

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Declaration

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the MPhil/PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

All names have been changed, except in cases where the individual is a public figure and gave consent to their real name being used.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the ways in which spirituality as a religious form interacts with political economy in the United States. Based on 22 months fieldwork in two small Northern Arizona towns, Sedona and Valle, it traces the way spirituality is enacted by individuals through foodways, bodily practice, and relationships to nature. I argue that it is pursued as an alternative to 'mainstream' American values, often summed up by my informants in the ideal of the 'American dream'. For them, the American dream is that any individual can succeed in a meritocratic system through hard work, increase their economic prosperity from one generation to the next, and pursuing this will lead to personal happiness and fulfilment. Pursuing one's spiritual path means foregrounding personal happiness and fulfilment often at the expense of economic prosperity. Spirituality is an alternative way of living and of making a living. This renegotiation of traditional American values is held to be the necessary response to the political, economic, and environmental crises of late capitalism. Spirituality is a category of growing salience for many Americans; while its genealogy remains complex and usage fluid, it has come to mean something specific for my informants, referring to what was once known, often pejoratively, as 'new age'. This thesis delineates the religious form called spirituality, defining it as a constellation of beliefs and practices clustered around the central concept of 'energy' as an all-pervasive force; 'the universe' as a pantheistic conception of divinity; and progressive stages of enlightenment described as a 'spiritual path'. The centring of the individual in spirituality mirrors the emphasis on individual responsibility at the heart of neoliberal policies implemented by successive governments since the late 1970s. At the same time, the expansion of agency to all nonhuman actors in spirituality destabilises the notion of human superiority as well as American exceptionalism. In this way, spirituality presents a challenge to dominant discourses in American society at the same time as it is constrained by the limits of those discourses.

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And heartfelt thanks to Alexander, without whom I would have finished much quicker, but it would all have been meaningless.

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Sedona, Arizona

Introduction: Creating Your Own Reality

"We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality"
– Karl Rove, in Mark Danner, *Words in a Time of War,* 2007, p. 17

Prologue: A Reading

It said "enchanted cottage" on the mailbox. Outside the house was decorated with Buddha statues, fairy lights, and wind chimes; the garden revolved around a labyrinth made from small stones. Inside the aesthetic continued; cobalt blue walls adorned with Celtic crosses, prayer flags in each rainbow colour, and crystals, crystals everywhere. I went in and Deb had me sit on a large reclining salon chair with a foot bath attached to the base. Once the water was heated, I dipped my feet in, it felt soothing, relaxing. Deb got me to pick a crystal to place in the water that would energise it and transfer the crystal's properties to the water and thus to me. I chose amethyst; good for spirituality. I chose an essential oil, orange for help with divination, that went on my wrists and in the water and which she later used to rub my feet. I picked a tincture, obsidian for clear thinking, which she dropped under my tongue. I selected 3 oracle cards from a mixed deck on the shelf to my right; the pictographic cards I selected read "release", "angel of cooperation", and "act on your inspiration". Deb closed her eyes for a moment, she said her angels were contacting mine to ask what this all meant. She said they were telling her that I'm like a sieve and I need to cover half of it so the rest fills the bowl, with so much knowledge coming in, I need to protect myself from others' energies and agendas, and keep my own counsel and do not be dissuaded of my own truth by someone else's. Their energy is like a thin film or residue over me; I need to clear it. I asked if a cleansing ritual would help, she said maybe I could do a whole ceremony but really all that was needed was to ask before having a shower that everything is cleared off me that is not for the highest good. After the reading was complete, she painted my toenails blue

109, a colour that held numerological synchronicity with my birth date. Then she finished by waving a tuning fork in figure eights, symbolising infinity, to activate my new DNA and open my chakras. Then she put on my flip flops, and I paid her $60, she thanked me and I thanked her and I left.

Readings like this "holistic pedicure" were some of my first introductions to spirituality in Sedona. I had found the practitioner, Deb, through her leaflet in the local organic grocery store on a rack of similar publications offering a variety of readings, tours, and classes that combined elements of healing therapies, explorations of consciousness, and mythological features from a number of different religious traditions. Despite this diversity, the essence of each reading was the same; the practitioner accessed the energy of the universe in some way in order to gain guidance. In Deb's reading, she spoke of guides, figured as angels, but the purpose was to read the energy, explain how I would be affected by it through pursuing my research, and advising me to clear it. Around this she wove a texture of different symbols from crystals to oracle cards to DNA and chakras. Numbers, colours, oils, and crystals corresponded with different abstract properties; I chose amethyst because it was associated with spirituality. Crystals transmitted their properties through the water to me all through the same pervasive concept of energy. The energy went through the crystal through the water into me; just as researching spirituality in Sedona meant that others' energy would flow into me and overwhelm me unless I cleared it by requesting that only the energy that benefitted my highest good remain. My highest good was equated with my "truth", which was different to others'; she advised me not to let their truth overwhelm mine.

The practitioner, Deb, styled herself a holistic therapist, psychic-intuitive, and reflexologist, who focused on the feet. The feet correspond to every other part of body; she told me she could work on any of the internal organs through the feet. Many people do not take good care of their feet, but if something is wrong with the feet it affects the whole body. The feet were a microcosm; the body was a macrocosm. This was the principle of holism; the interconnectedness of all things. So through giving me a pedicure, Deb could tell how I relate to others and how I perceive myself from the condition of my feet. Everything was connected because everything was energy.

Prior to the reading, I interviewed Deb over a breakfast of omelettes and coffee

at one of the local restaurants; she had a handful of pills with the meal, which I assumed were vitamin supplements. Deb related what I came to understand as a typical life narrative of someone involved in spirituality in Sedona. She had been interested in metaphysics and spirituality since 1989. Raised Catholic, she now called herself a "recovering Catholic", and mentioned how she did not like the rules, dogma, and control of the Church hierarchy. She grew up mobile, first following her father's job in the military, then her husband's in hospital admin; she moved every year. Divorce in 1998 led her to become a healer; she had lived in Sedona since 2001. In 2005 she moved to Hawaii and tried to start her business there, but it did not work out and she returned to Sedona. In her narrative, her guides told her to go and then told her she was finished and should return. She did not want to go backwards but her guides told her she was on a spiral there and back, so even though it seemed like she was going back on herself she was actually spiralling onwards.

Deb's guides loomed large in her story. At first she thought of them as angels; however, they called themselves "divine source". Initially they used the name Raphael, then Uriel, now they did not have a specific name. She spoke to them internally rather than out loud. She did what they said, but she had her own opinion on things and argued with them sometimes. Her guides led her to Sedona. Although she had heard of the place through her clients at the Aveda beauty salon she was working at, she thought it was overrated. Then realised she was "meant to be there" through the intervention of her guides.

Deb's itinerancy was typical of those that feel called to Sedona; they move around, seeking something they do not yet have words for, rarely born in Arizona, they hear about Sedona or visit it, then heed the call. This suggests the interaction of providence and individual agency that recurs throughout spirituality. Deb was directed by her guides but still she argued with them; she thought Sedona was overrated but still she was meant to be there; she did not want to return from Hawaii because she saw it as going backwards but her guides showed her that it was part of a larger pattern. Her own agency pushed with and pulled against a preordained destiny. This destiny spoke through the voice of angelic guides, originally given names from Catholic apocrypha in keeping with her religious background, but then the names were dropped as she became

more aware of what was speaking to her: “divine source”.

Deb told me that she loved giving people their first pedicure. At the end they should be so relaxed that they just go home and enjoy it. Helping people in this way was its own reward, but also part of a larger mission for her. Healing was part of what she had to do to get her desire that this would be her last lifetime. She was doing all she could to fulfil her purpose and help others so she did not have to come back again. She called herself an old soul and said she was tired of incarnating. Everyone has a purpose; everything happens for a reason. Her healing helped remove blocks people were experiencing that prevented them from being all they could be and achieving their purpose; sometimes she helped them realise what their purpose was. Purpose is everything; a human lifetime is working out and fulfilling this purpose. Not realising purpose kept the wheel of reincarnation spinning, keeping the soul incarnating to learn the required lessons.

Aerial view of Sedona taken from the top of Bell Rock, showing the southeast of the city.

During our first interview I realised I had seen Deb the day before at Heart of Sedona, a coffee shop popular with locals, with her dog. She had left the dog, named Cinnabon, tied to an adjacent table while I was talking to an interior designer/feng shui practitioner. Then she came out and got him, cooing his name repeatedly. At our meeting, as she again said the dog's name, I remembered that I had heard it before and mentioned it to her. She laughed and said "that's so Sedona", things like that happen there all the time. Sedona is a special place; it has special energy. The energy spoke through these frequent weird coincidences, called synchronicities. As with guides, it was the universe sending messages; directing toward your purpose, your preordained destiny, your spiritual path.

I found Deb through her advertising, and I paid for the spiritual service she offered; this points to the transactional nature of relationships in spirituality. With no institutional support like a church that tithes, individual practitioners had to rely on their own resources to make a living. Even meditation sessions had a fee or a donation solicited. Very few spiritual activities I participated in did not have some kind of monetary exchange involved. Religion and economics were intimately intertwined. The problems of exchanging money for spiritual services were often iterated; that it was not 'really' spirituality if you were making money. Yet many of the same people voicing such caveats were trying to run spiritual businesses of varying types. Deb's was a typical spiritual business in Sedona; run from home, offering a mix of spirituality and wellness, healing but also pampering. For those more interested in a foot rub she could leave out the reading; for those involved in spirituality she could crack out the oracle cards and crystals. Deb explained how her business succeeded because she found a niche in Sedona; no one else did pedicures. Plus she was a perfectionist, very thorough, so she did them very well. Most new businesses fail in Sedona, but she succeeded. It was difficult to make a living in Sedona, people moved there to follow their spiritual path but the realisation of this dream frustrated many. Individual success was taken as a sign of fulfilling one's purpose. The successful were meant to be there, those that failed were not.

The Cosmology of Spirituality

This thesis traces the contours of what my informants called 'spirituality'. I arrived in Sedona looking for what scholars of religion have been calling 'the new age' for the past four decades (Hammer 2004; Hanegraaff 1996, 2000; Prince and Riches 2000; Ivakhiv 2001; Albanese 2006, 2007; Lau 2000; Pike 2004; Basil 1988; Lewis and Melton 1992; York 1995, 1999, 2001; Wood 2007; Sutcliffe 2002, 2011; Campion 2016; Rothstein 2001; Heelas 1996, 2008; Woodhead and Heelas 2005; Lewis and Kemp 2007; O'Neil 2001; Tucker 2002; Kyle 1995; Redden 2005; Possamai 2003). I found that my informants spurned this term, and spoke instead of spirituality[1]. A smaller number of analyses have started to reckon with this change (Partridge 2004a; Brown 1999; Bender 2010; Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2013; Huss 2014; Lynch 2007). I have come to define spirituality as a constellation of beliefs and practices clustered around the central concept of 'energy' as an all-pervasive force; 'the universe' as a pantheistic conception of divinity; and progressive stages of enlightenment described as a 'spiritual path'. The word 'spirituality' has a complex genealogy and its relationship to 'religion' is a vexed question among historians and sociologists of religion (Principe 1983; Fuller 2001; Lippy 2000; Wuthnow 1998; Hanegraaff 2000: 296; Schneiders 2003; Huss 2015). However, this definition is my best fit for the way it was used in the particular ethnographic moment this thesis delineates which is based on 22 months fieldwork from July 2012 - April 2014 in the small towns of Sedona and Valle in Northern Arizona[2].

[1] The local pejorative term for 'new age' was "woo woo", which was most often used by Sedonans who were not involved in it, or by those who were but were trying to differentiate themselves from others with whom they did not like to be defined. Yet the very act of claiming they were "not woo woo" showed an awareness that both they and those they disagreed with could be clumped together.

[2] While in terms of geographical context my field-site was delimited to Sedona and Valle, spirituality is not only found in Northern Arizona. "Global spirituality" has an international scope, and can be found primarily across the English-speaking world (Corrywright 2007). Most of my informants were American, although few were Arizonan, most came from the heavily populated areas of California, the East Coast, and the MidWest, there were some Canadians, British, even fewer Western Europeans, Australians, and East Asians (Korean and Japanese), and no one from South America, Africa, India, what might be termed the 'global south'. As it appeared to me in Northern Arizona, people involved in spirituality tend to be educated, English-speaking, and culturally 'Western'. This characterisation was further confirmed by the demographics who came to Sedona to attend conferences, workshops, and go on spiritual vacations. However, numerous case studies on non-English speaking contexts have been published (Carozzi 2007; Prohl 2007; de la Torre et al 2016; Steyn 2003; Doktór 1999; van Otterloo 1999; Gilhus, Kraft, and Lewis

Sedona has a reputation as a spiritual centre and many of the residents and visitors come there seeking to follow their spiritual path (Ivakhiv 2007: 263). I begin by sketching a cosmology of spirituality, then elaborate the major themes and main argument of the thesis.

Following the spiritual path was an individual pursuit for my informants; each person's spiritual path was their own to discern. This was part of creating their own reality; each person's individual choices constituted their spirituality. This individual pursuit was, however, part of a wider change. As each person turned away from materialistic concerns towards their spiritual path, a new society was being created, with a new economy. This change came about not through organised, collective action but through a critical mass formed of individuals acting independently that then triggers a change in the collective reality[3]. By some this was termed the "new paradigm", others called it "the shift" or "ascension"; it was a period of revolutionary change heralding the ascent of spirituality over materialism, cooperation over competition, peace over war, sharing over greed, heart over head, feeling over thinking, intuition over logic. Astrologically this was framed as the movement from the Age of Pisces to the Age of Aquarius (Pike 2004: 145-146; Hanegraaff 1996: 102-103). The origin of the term 'new age' derives from early 20th century Theosophical Society materials, particularly the pamphlets of Alice Bailey announcing the imminent beginning of the Age of Aquarius and return of Christ (Sutcliffe 2002: 26-27; Albanese 2006: 465).

Those already on the spiritual path were the vanguard of this revolutionary change, which affected every aspect of their lives from where they lived to how they ate to how they earned their money. The individual is at the centre of this formulation of spirituality. Its most striking difference from American Christianity is perhaps this lack of a notion of a collective of believers equivalent to a church, that joins together (like a congregation), agrees on a shared set of core principles (like a creed), and shares a

2016; Klin-Oran 2014; Burdziej 2009; Kuhlman 1999; Kubiak 1999; Olechnicki 2009; Shimazono 1999; Zinser 1992). This characterisation is therefore likely affected by the fact that it is educated, English-speaking, culturally 'Western' people who typically travel to and move to Sedona and the surrounding areas. As such, even though there is an international scope to spirituality, I am looking specifically at the American form. An interesting avenue of further research would be delineating the spread of "global spirituality".

[3] This is the hundredth monkey idea based on an outdated theory in biological anthropology that if you teach a hundred monkeys a skill then it spreads to the whole group of monkeys like a chain reaction, see Brown 1999: 48; Hanegraaff 1996: 351.

portion of its resources (like a tithe). This thesis examines whether spirituality can be described as a religion of individuals, and to what extent this reflects the wider emphasis on individualism in the political economy of the United States. Following Bender's ethnography of spirituals in New England, I emphasise how spirituality is historically situated and socially embedded (2010: 5). This is important because the universalising tendencies in spirituality tend to de-historicise and de-locate cultural practices. In particular, the argument of this thesis rests on an analysis of spirituality as a reformulation of western esotericism in interaction with neoliberal capitalism (Ivakhiv 2001: 9; Huss 2014a: 53).

Spirituality as I encountered it in the field had a specific cosmology. Energy is the central organising concept of this cosmology. Everything is energy; it composes the substance of everything in the universe. Energy vibrates at specific frequencies and this creates the appearance of mass. Mass is merely an illusion, however, an effect of living in the third dimension. This is the dimension we are currently in and it is characterised by density, which is given a moral valence. Things that are dense are a heavy drag upon the spirit keeping it down in the third dimension. Good energy, good vibrations, are characterised as light and uplifting. This corresponds on an emotional level; sadness, anger, bitterness are all heavy, dense, third dimensional emotions, whereas happiness, love, and trust have a higher vibration. Raising the frequency of vibration by being positive emotionally is one way of ascending through the progressive levels called dimensions, a process called ascension. Energy criss-crosses the Earth in a grid pattern of "ley lines", the intersections of which are called "vortexes" and are figured as spirals (see chapter two). Sedona sits at one such intersection, which is why it has such special energy and why so many spiritual seekers feel called there (Ivakhiv 2001: 29-30; Brown 1999: 40).

Ascension operates both on a social level and an individual level, referring to a change in both the individual and society towards higher spiritual development, although certain committed individuals will ascend quicker than the planet as a whole. The ultimate aim of ascension is to achieve oneness with the universe, which is sometimes also called source or spirit. There are parallels with both Christian theological and gnostic conceptions of leaving the material behind for the sake of

spiritual perfection (Campion 2016: 3; Hanegraaff 1996: 320). Energy is an attracting force, since like attracts like, something with good or high energy will attract the same. Energy is something felt rather than seen or touched; psychics in particular would tell me that they feel a person's energy and tell them where it is going rather than directly read thoughts or see the future. Channellers and healers direct energy from the universe and use it to receive messages and heal respectively. Energy cannot be destroyed so death is the transference of energy to another form, either in this dimension or to a higher or lower one, a process referred to as reincarnation. The term energy is ubiquitous in spirituality, operating as a floating signifier[4], used to refer to god, the universe, and everything (Albanese 2006: 495-499: Kripal 2007: 19; Prince and Riches 2000: 91-92; Ivakhiv 2001: 24-30; Bender 2010: 115; Hanegraaff 1996: 175).

Energy is closely related to vibration, because just as everything is energy all energy vibrates. A high vibration is associated with being more spiritual and having special powers, such as invisibility or levitation. Changing the vibration is a way of changing the self; walking the spiritual path is often described by my informants as raising their vibration. Frequency is the speed of the vibration, and it is measured in hertz (Hz). It is used in a similar sense to vibration and energy because everything also has a frequency. It is often used in reference to sounds. My first host in Sedona, Vixen du Lac, told me that 432 Hz is the heart frequency, so new paradigm music is made on this frequency because as a loving frequency it helps to raise the vibration, whereas heavy metal and Christian music have a low frequency, with no use of 432 Hz, this lowers the vibration and can cause evil and self-harm. The concepts of energy, frequency, and vibration are very close and are often used interchangeably.

Energy, frequency, and vibration are characteristics of the universe. When Deb spoke of "divine source" she was talking about the immanent pantheistic conception of divinity, which is more commonly referred to as 'the universe'. People also termed it 'source', 'spirit', or more rarely 'God'. Using the term source highlights that it is the origin of everything; I also heard the terms 'zero-point' and 'singularity' used. It is an idea influenced by Neoplatonism of a single source out of which all creation emanates.

[4] A floating signifier is a "symbol emptied by a surfeit of possible and seemingly contradictory meanings" according to Scott 2013: 860, see also Lévi-Strauss 1987: 63-64 and Mehlman 1972.

While energy is to some extent isomorphic with the universe because the universe is everything and everything is energy; it is more nuanced than that. Energy is the ripples emanating out of source that create reality; the universe is composed of energy vibrating at different frequencies. The higher the frequency of the vibration of the energy, the closer to the universe which is the highest vibration but at the same time contains all other vibrations. The spiritual path raises the frequency of vibrations elevating the individual closer to the universe and reuniting with source.

The universe is not an agentive divinity in the sense that it does not mete out punishment or answer prayers; it reflects back the energy that individuals put out. Happy thoughts reflect back positive vibrations from the universe, negative thoughts reflect back negativity. Positivity and wellness are therefore morally valenced because through good speech and action individuals are actively creating the reality of the dimension they are in. Yet while it is not agentive in this way, the universe is still held responsible for things: "the universe wants you to have this", "I asked the universe for such and such", "you need to trust in the universe". This is because the universe is a reflection of the self, so trusting in the universe is trusting in the self. It is the self that is actually being held responsible here. This is the principle of oneness. A common phrase among my informants was "we are all one", meaning that we are all of the same substance, we are all divine, only our experience is different. The point of this existence is to experience this difference; life is a way for divinity to experience itself in infinite forms. In a channelling session the channeller described what he was doing as "it's just me talking to myself as you"[5]. As such existence is an illusion of separation, we perceive ourselves as separate beings composed of dense mass because of our perspective in the third dimension. Different dimensions grant different perspectives, which is why, for example, we cannot see aliens but they can see us. But beyond this illusion is an inherent oneness of all things. There follows from this a rejection of dualisms, such as good/evil, male/female, you/me, which is sometimes noticed by scholars when describing 'the new age' (Kripal 2007: 15; Hanegraaff 1996: 516). These dualisms are

[5] Channelling is receiving messages from a non-human entity, such as the dead, aliens, the higher self in the future, or the universe itself, and relaying it often verbally but it can also be accomplished through automatic writing. I attended numerous different types of channelling session in Sedona, it is also described in New Mexico in Brown 1999, and in Israel in Klin-Oran 2014.

an effect of living in this dimension and as such following the spiritual path means evolving beyond such notions. This proved difficult in practice, however, and a theme throughout this thesis will be the difference between holding the cosmological principle of non-dualistic oneness in theory and the practicality of living separate, individual existences in Sedona.

The principle of oneness is why everything is interconnected; because it is all part of the same energy of the universe. Nothing is random; everything means something because everything is connected energetically, so if a coincidence occurs it is actually pointing a larger 'truth' or mission. As with the recognition of her dog in my meeting with Deb, coincidence is called synchronicity and interpreted as the universe sending messages (Kripal 2007: 14-15). Again, this is not to say that the universe is exercising agency but that the energy that vibrates out from source hits certain frequencies that resonate with particular individuals. So paying attention to synchronicities is a way of reading the signs that suggest how to follow the spiritual path. This resonance is a sign that activating that particular frequency will bring that individual into alignment with the energy of the universe. Alignment has the sense of being in harmony, sometimes the word attunement is also used, meaning being in tune with the frequency of the energy of the universe. The aim is to align the self with the universe through going on the spiritual path, which is a way back to oneness by raising the frequency of the vibration of the energy until it resonates in harmony with the universe in oneness. When this happens the self will disappear; the illusion of separation will fade.

As already mentioned, the universe is composed of multiple dimensions. We live in the third dimension (3D), which is a dense dimension of matter with a relatively low vibration where many of the abilities associated with higher vibrations, such as invisibility, levitation, or instant manifestation, are not possible except to certain high vibrational individuals. This is the cause of the misery and suffering in this world; it is theodicy, spirituality's answer to the question of why evil exists. Some individuals in this dimension are able to simultaneously inhabit higher dimensions because of their high vibration; these are the spiritual teachers, ascended masters, and starseeds (see chapter six). The concept of dimension suggests the influence of 20th century theoretical

physics particularly quantum theory and multiverses, which will be discussed in more detail below. However, dimension is used as a religious motif meaning something analogous to planes of existence rather than as scientifically quantifiable phenomena. Dimensions are a way of accessing other realms of consciousness, sometime through achieving altered states of consciousness; the mind has to be altered to perceive other dimensions (Kripal 2007: 23; Brown 1999: 6; Hanegraaff 2008). The concept is perhaps more indebted to early 20th century artists, such as Marcel Duchamp and certain contemporaries, than to physicists. For Duchamp, the fourth dimension is not time in physicists' sense but "the 'real' but strictly unrepresentable domain beyond, or encompassing, the 'ordinary' world" (Gell 1998: 243). Since 2D objects cast 1D shadows, and 3D objects cast 2D shadows, so a 3D shadow would be cast by a 4D object. The fourth dimension is conceivable but not representable because it requires more dimensions than we have access to in the 3D. This describes dimensions in spirituality better than trying to map on physicists' notions of multiple dimensions of space-time.

However, spirituality is still deeply influenced by modern science as has been observed by previous studies (Hammer 2004: 201-330; Asprem 2015; von Stuckrad 2014). Science describes the same reality as spirituality, however, scientists are limited by their methods which rely on falsifiable, empirical data and peer reviewed studies. As one of my informants put it, metaphysics is better than physics because it goes *beyond* physics. It is possible to know more through metaphysics because it can access non-empirical reality. Clearly the talk about energy, frequency, and vibration is heavily indebted to Einstein's theory of relativity among others, but it is a religious understanding of it that is used as a basis for spirituality. The displacement of the big bang theory with that of multiverses, where our universe is just one bubble in an ever-expanding sea of universes with the potential for "portals" between bubbles, is reflected in the cosmology of multiple dimensions as stages of spiritual evolution with reincarnation between multiverses (Rubenstein 2014). The cosmology of spirituality seems to echo quantum theory in a similar way to how the big bang theory echoed Christian theologies of creation ex nihilo (Rubenstein 2012: 506-507). The concept of energy makes claim to personal effects from the impersonal laws of physics.

Throughout this thesis, the religious uses of science in spirituality will continue to be explored as part of the ongoing discussion of how social reality is constituted in this context.

Within the third dimension, reality takes a specific form in mass. Individuals thus have bodies; the fleshy, dense 3D corporeal formation of the self (see chapter four). The self is further subdivided into the higher self and the mind. The higher self is also called the soul; it has a higher vibration than the mind or body, and so exists in a higher dimension. The higher self has guides which can be angelic, extraterrestrial, or extradimensional beings, although as with Deb's, these guides are simply a personification of the energy of the universe, a way to make it easier to divine the spiritual path. It is the higher self, along with its guides, which is eternal, reincarnating in different forms with different minds and bodies in each lifetime. It is a more positive version of the self because it is not in the 3D and therefore closer to source. The mind is also called the ego or the "monkey mind", it is the most third dimensional part of the self. While the body can be improved, made lighter through right diet and exercise, the mind can only be silenced (see chapter three). The mind chatters; it doubts; it needs. All of the negative third dimensional emotions are the product of the mind. The mind is what undermines confidence, it is what manipulates others. Walking the spiritual path is listening to the soul over the mind, learning how to quiet the mind, tune it out, often through meditation, and hear only the higher self, which speaks through intuition. Intuition is the guidance of the soul, located in the heart rather than the head. "Heart-wisdom" is intuition and comes from the higher self whereas "head-logic" or reason comes from the mind or ego. This is a radical inversion of scientific empiricism and the 'Western' notion of rationality; it elevates internal feelings over the dictates of logic and reason. This is significant because the new paradigm is built on exactly this shift in thinking; the consequence of which is to cast into doubt many of the social transformations and ideas associated with 'progress' and 'civilisation' (see chapter five).

While it is important to follow the energy of the universe in order to reunite with source it is also important to direct one's own energy towards the same end. There are two main ways of doing this: setting intention and manifestation. Intention is the motivation behind doing something, which is important because the intention affects the

energy that is attracted by an action. Rituals invariably begin with setting the intention, which required little more than closing one's eyes and thinking about what that is. However, there is a difference between conscious and unconscious intention. A person who is not awake is still at the mercy of their unconscious intentions, so can create negative energy even if their conscious intention was good. Being awake means uniting conscious and unconscious intentions through silencing the mind and listening to the higher self. Manifestation is a term used to describe the way individuals affect and even determine the things that happen in their life; the way they create their own reality.

Manifestation occurs when the individual aligns with the energy of the universe. To manifest something is to focus attention, time, and effort on that thing until it happens. In Sedona, this was conceived of as a magical process even if it actually occurred through fairly mundane actions like selling goods or receiving gifts from friends and relatives. It is commonly used in conjunction with the term 'abundance', a word that connotes wealth but more generally things that hold value. Emphasis shifts from defining wealth purely in financial terms to a broader purchase; I heard people talk of abundance of love, or community, or laughter. It is about spiritual as well as material wealth. However, saying "I'm working on my abundance" was often a code for trying to make money.

There is a sense that manifestation is a way to effortless enrichment. It is not meant to be stressful or arduous, indeed one way to tell if an action or desired end is in alignment with the energy of the universe is that it happens easily, as if by magic. Manifestation can also be enhanced through using certain types of conduits, the most popular of which is crystals. Crystals are everywhere in spirituality (Albanese 2006: 499; Partridge 2004: 70; Bartolini et al 2013; Kyle 1995: 70-71). They are a means of focusing, carrying, and transferring energy. Different crystals vibrate at different frequencies, which endows them with specific properties. Crystals move on their own to find people who need them; when I lost a necklace with a copper-wrapped piece of topaz I was told that it had moved on to someone else who needed it more. Crystals have agency. The prices of the crystals range from one dollar to several thousand dollars for the large crystal skulls and free standing large stones. Crystals have significant monetary value in Sedona and beyond; meaning they could be exchanged easily for large amounts

Two large crystals on display outside the Center for the New Age, Sedona.

of cash. However, the terms my informants explained it in is that crystals are a potent means for manifestation because they are the main conduits for energy.

Money has a low vibration because it is entangled with negative actions and emotions such as greed, exploitation, and environmental destruction. Having or seeking to acquire large amounts of money means acting in ways that hold back individual, social, and planetary spiritual development. Wage labour particularly for a large corporation is the worst way to maintain a living because it has no beneficial consequences spiritually; for my informants such jobs were both bad for the soul and bad for the planet (see chapter seven). Those at the head of large corporations are responsible for such a wide range of low vibration actions that they are often considered to be part of a "dark cabal" of Reptilians, lizard-like aliens, whose sole purpose in this incarnation is to hold people and planets in the 3D for their own profit (Robertson 2015;

Barkun 2003: 98-109; Partridge 2004b: 179-184). My informants who were working towards spiritual development often called themselves "light-workers" because they were actively trying to raise the vibration of themselves and the planet; some even claimed to be inhabited by the consciousness of a member of one of the races of "good" aliens that fought against the Reptilians (see chapter 6).

This cosmology is in a sense a gloss based on common terms; some in Sedona did not use these specific words as much as others, but there was a commonality of concepts behind the different terms used. There is a linguistic flexibility allowed in spirituality, so whether it is called the universe, source, or spirit on one level does not matter, because these words mean the same thing, they invoke the same essence. Words are to a certain extent epiphenomenal; what really matters is the energy of what is said. However, on another level, word choice is very important because words have power, they do things. Echoing Favret-Saada's ethnography of witchcraft in the Bocage, to speak words is to invoke power not merely give information (1980 [1977]: 8-9). This resemblance grows stronger in the common refrain in Sedona that words are spells, which is "why it's called spelling". In practice this meant practising clean speech, avoiding the word "no", not speaking negatively especially about other people in the form of insults or gossip. The vibration of the word is very important. Words both create reality and are epiphenomenal; both constituting what happens and an imprecise gloss over the same essential energy of the universe.

Words have this double nature because while what we perceive in the third dimension seems different, in fact everything comes from the same source and reveals the same higher 'truth'. What follows from this is that those involved in spirituality can pick and choose freely from any sources as inspiration, regardless of cultural, religious, or national heritage. Cross-cultural concepts are seen as equivalent; so energy is equated with the Holy Spirit, prana, chi, and mana (Lucas 1992: 194). This is because the differences attributed to culture, religion, or nation are epiphenomenal; they are dismissed as merely an appearance of difference that masks the fundamental unity of all things. While in theory this picking and choosing can be from any source, in practice some sources are more popular than others. Native Americans, Tibetan Buddhism, and Catholic Christianity all featured far more frequently in my informants' spiritual paths

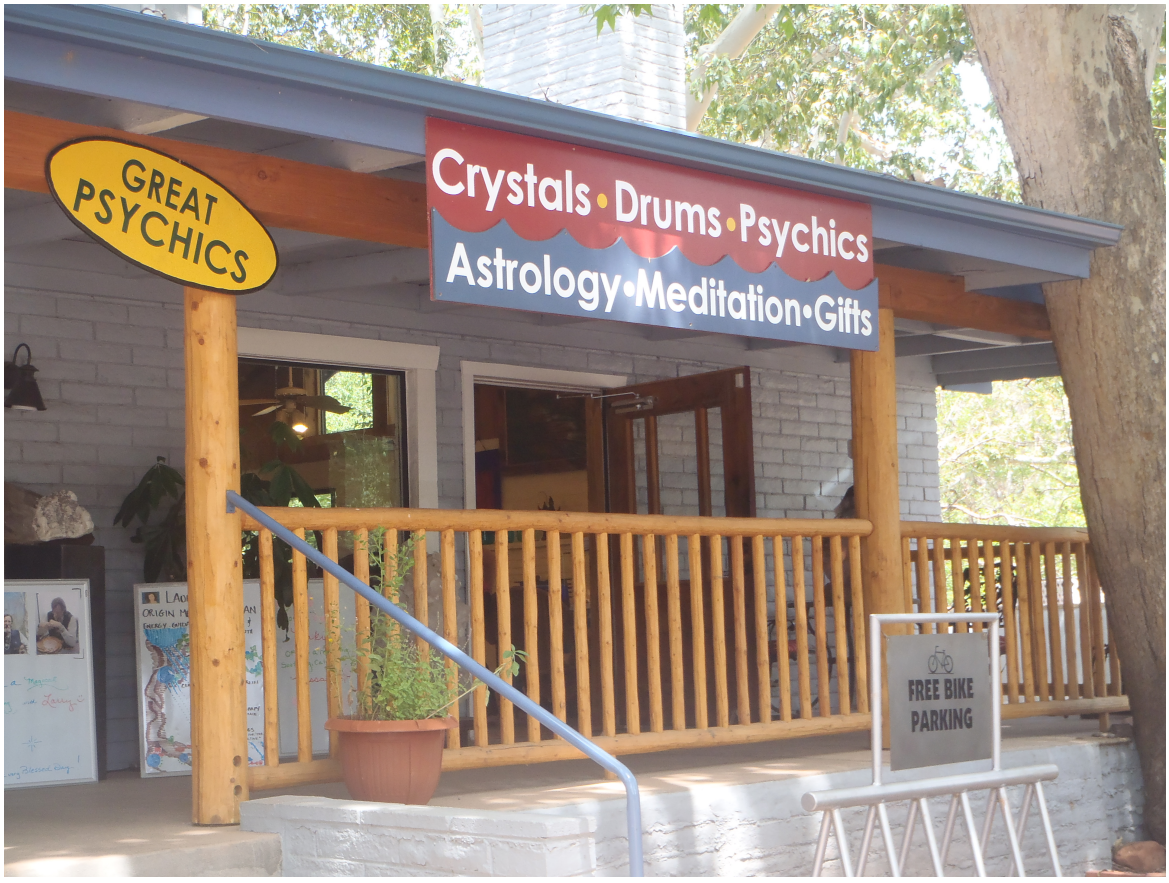
and aesthetics than other sources. These sources are those seen as more 'spiritual' in American culture generally; they are also those which my informants would have more access to thanks to proximity and prevalence in Arizona[6]. While this tendency towards universalism strips spiritual practices and ideas of their cultural and historical specificity, it has its own specific historical trajectory. Schmidt traces the universalist tendency in American spirituality to at least the works of poet Walt Whitman (2012: 103-104). 19th century religious liberals saw the "sympathy of religions" as fundamental, and Schmidt calls this "a key" in understanding the subsequent eclecticism of American spirituality (ibid: 106). Sympathy was for Whitman and his liberal peers a way of unifying and identifying with others, particularly of overcoming sectarian religious divides.

What is interesting is that now it is a divisive principle; the most often cited reason by critics that spirituality is inauthentic and appropriating, especially of Native American religious culture (Kehoe 2000; Aldred 2000; Deloria 1998). Seeing cultures as freely chosen and free to choose from can obscure power relations. Bourdieu calls this "the imperialism of the universal" (1998: 19). The idea that cultural differences can be dismissed is an exercise of power; the universal that is expanded as the norm is an American universal; subsuming all others into itself is not so much sympathy as imperial domination. It is a manoeuvre that exerts control in both a political and economic sense. Objects, practices, even people are first decontextualised, in the sense of being extracted from their social networks, in order to transform them from agents in a human economy into products for sale in a commercial economy (Graeber 2011: 146). The commodification and appropriation of other cultural practices in spirituality needs to be viewed through a lens of political-economic theory to explicate the power relations in which it remains embedded.

This analytic direction is contrary to what was, at least on the surface, advocated by my informants, which is that they were separate, or at least wanted to be, from the

[6] This is proximity and prevalence in a cultural sense; indeed, demographically the most numerous religions in Northern Arizona are evangelical Protestantism and Mormonism, see http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/reports/counties/04005_2000.asp These two religions were almost never used as sources for spirituality. But in the literature and aesthetics related to spirituality available in Northern Arizona the North American Indians, Tibetan Buddhism, and Catholic Christianity were easily the most prominent.

wider relations of power and exchange in American society. Many of my informants advocated a new form of economy with a higher vibration. Barter and trade were preferred, at least rhetorically, over money transactions. Prince and Riches describe the difficulties of achieving this among 'new agers' in Glastonbury, UK; although they wished to create a separate economic sphere based on spiritual principles in practice they continued to rely on government assistance and participation in the 'mainstream' economy (2000: 137-154). Deb discussed the problems of barter and trade with me in Sedona; she did not like it because people treated it as less important than money when it was actually more important. She only used barter and trades with two people she trusted. Manifestation is meant to be a non-exploitative form of accumulation (ibid: 138). However, as will be explored throughout this thesis, reliance on the market



One of the many 'new age' stores in Sedona.

economy persists; despite the utopian leanings towards economic transformation, my informants remained embedded in the capitalist political economy of the US.

Methodology

Anthropology seems to imply its methodology; it is a form of training in a specific method of doing social science research, to the extent that 'doing' anthropology often means 'doing' participant observation fieldwork. Yet the history of ethnographic fieldwork suggests the variety of forms this can take and as such what participant observation fieldwork entails in a given cultural context is not self-evident (Stocking 1984). From the outset, I designated my 'field' as Sedona, a small-town in Northern Arizona renowned for its vortexes that draws a significant number of spiritual seekers through migration and tourism. It was in many ways a traditional anthropological 'village study', albeit in the non-traditional (although by now common) location of the industrialised modern 'Western' nation of the USA. Although Sedona seemed to have a self-evident geographical boundary, it quickly revealed itself to be as much an arbitrarily bounded notion as any 'field site' (Candea 2007). The city of Sedona as an incorporated political unit excluded the Village of Oak Creek but they were separated by only six miles and colloquially both referred to as 'Sedona'. The vortexes had four specific locations but also no specific locations; they were significant yet they were not; the town was associated with the 'new age', but no one called themselves a new ager. Somehow, the 'woo woo' was always over there, practised by someone else. All of this and more called into question my naive assumption that I could go to 'Sedona' and study 'new age' and the 'vortexes'.

There was also the question of how to go about participating in and observing 'spirituality', something that suggests the ineffable, the invisible, and the interior. I first went about doing a sort of 'ethnography-by-appointment'; attending conferences with spiritual themes, going to workshops by groups that advertised as explicitly spiritual, and interviewing practitioners that advertised their spiritual services, such as Deb. This yielded limited results. Interviews were not that helpful; they tended towards the

superficial as practitioners advertised their services and gave idealised versions but did not want to spend much more time beyond the first or second meeting, considering our business complete. Some were no doubt disappointed that I was not more useful in publicising or helping their business. Others simply did not have the time or inclination to 'hang out' with an anthropologist on a long-term basis. Continued attendance of workshops and conferences proved too expensive. Like many ethnographers, a few key friendships fortuitously made (one through a random encounter at the Burning Man festival in Nevada, the other through my first host who rented out rooms in her house to tourists) introduced me to the 'spiritual scene' in Sedona. I switched to regularly visiting the coffee shops, drum circles, and community events I knew people involved in spirituality frequented. Some interviews did still render insights once I had established a range of groups and individuals with whom I regularly associated. I interviewed all the fire spinners, and this forms the data for chapter four, and all the starseeds I knew, which is related in chapter six. I also formed a series of questions about kinship terms and economic situation that I systematically asked to most of the people I saw regularly, which is also used in chapter six. I developed food diaries for keeping a track of my informants' diet, from which some of the insights in chapter three derived.

Especially at the beginning of my fieldwork, I suffered the problems of empathising with and suspending my disbelief about the claims of 'new agers' in the way Mulcock describes her fieldwork among alternative healing and spirituality practitioners in Australia (2001, 2004). Their claims seemed absurd, and although I did not admit it, I felt on some level that as educated, relatively affluent Americans they should know better. Much of what people told me about energy, aliens, and vortexes seemed like nonsense. But at the same time, my informants were pulling me into their discourse. A shaman, astrologer, and tour guide I interviewed early on in my fieldwork told me directly that I was on a spiritual path, whether I realised it or not. This was repeated by several people independently of one another. By simply studying spirituality, I was embarking on my own spiritual path. I was reminded of Favret-Saada's ethnography of witchcraft in the French Bocage region, by asking about witchcraft she was taking a position in the discourse of witchcraft, and had to become an unwitcher because the only other position available was a witch (1980: 10). My spiritual

path, like anyone else's, was mine to discern, however. I took this as instruction on how to undertake fieldwork in this context. I listened to my intuition; I aligned myself with the energy of the universe. If it felt right to me, that was the direction I took. This lead to a more physically focused fieldwork than I had anticipated. I climbed rocks, I practised yoga, I learned kung fu. Wacquant's ethnography of boxing proved instructive in this, I followed his lead and pursued a carnal anthropology; ethnography learned, recorded, and produced through the body (2004: vii). Going with the flow of the energy of the universe was not always easy or fun though. I fell in too deep with the kung fu group and found myself being repeatedly punched in the stomach as "training". Sometimes, my suspension of disbelief became total, as when I engaged in discussions with a friend about our past life as boss and secretary together or when I channelled my goddess archetype, Shining Woman. I found myself, as I commented at the time, "redefining my sense of nonsense".

This took a dark turn just over a year into my stay in Sedona; a friend of mine committed suicide. No one would say it was suicide though. They only talked about her energy transforming into her next incarnation. At the same time, I had the opportunity to join some people I knew through fire spinning in their off-grid homestead venture in Valle, two hours drive north of Sedona, which is related in chapter seven. There is no ostensible connection between Sedona and Valle beyond this relationship; most Sedonans would not know Valle existed as it is not so much a town as a collection of scattered trailers and RVs in the vicinity of a gas station. With this move, I delimited my field site as not only arbitrary but "un-sited", a field disconnected from a coherent notion of space (Cook, Laidlaw, and Mair 2009: 69). It was not so much a 'field site' as just a field, with a tent pitched on it. Yet this rendered what I consider my deepest insights about spirituality and its relationship to political economy in following through on the spiritual seeker's oft-stated but rarely realised dream of moving beyond society to communal, self-sufficient living off-grid. Returning from the field meant, in many ways, ending my experiment with taking seriously the idea that I was on a spiritual path, and writing about spirituality and the paths people take through it from a critical distance. Yet this critical evaluation of spirituality and political economy is methodologically informed by my own spiritual path, which shaped my arbitrarily defined 'field site'.

Everything Happens for a Reason

Browsing the gift section in the organic grocery store in Sedona, New Frontiers, I came across a tall mug in turquoise with a picture of a dragonfly and the slogan, "everything happens for a reason, just believe". This was a common refrain in Sedona, among the spiritual and not, and among Americans I knew more widely. It's a conventional inspirational quote pasted onto stock photos of beautiful landscapes and posted as a meme online. Its ubiquity reaches the status of cliche in American culture. What struck me about this phrase, and led me to buy the mug, was how it summed up a cosmological point in spirituality while also pointing to an irony in that thinking. Everything happens for a reason because there is a greater purpose behind all of life's events. In the cosmology of spirituality, this is sometimes called a "soul contract", but even those who did not use this specific term spoke of an agreement that the soul makes before it incarnates that contains everything that will happen in this lifetime. So everything that happens has already been determined and accepted by the soul before this lifetime begins. However, once incarnated the self does not have access to this contract, and must go about creating their reality as they choose. This is why the signs of the right path need to be discerned by paying attention to those synchronicities and the heart wisdom of intuition. Alignment with the energy of the universe is not obvious; Deb could only hope this was her last incarnation by fulfilling her purpose to the best of her ability, it was not guaranteed. Following the spiritual path is fulfilling the soul contract; but implied within this is the possibility that the contract will not be fulfilled, it could even be broken, and thus incarnation continues. So on one level everything has been agreed to in advance, a form of providence, the belief that there is a divine plan for all things, but on another free will is operating, opening a space for individual agency. This is why I found the mug ironic; if everything happens for a reason then there is no need to believe or doubt in anything because it has all been predetermined, yet it ends with "just believe", suggesting there is still that space of doubt and belief.

This interaction of providence and individual agency is a major theme running

through this thesis, one that is not unique to spirituality but found throughout American Christianity and cultural narratives more broadly. It goes to a central philosophical question; why are things the way they are? To put it in an anthropological frame, how and why is social reality constituted? Is it the outcome of individual actions or agency, and therefore are we free to live as we choose? Or is there a broader structure determining what happens? Are we in fact not free, but the determined products of larger forces? This question goes back to the founding of America. Puritan colonists saw the settlement of America as a special mission and providence from God (Ammerman 1987: 17). Westward expansion of the American empire across Native American lands was justified by the doctrine of Manifest Destiny; that God provided this land for white conquest (Harvey 1990: 275; Prince 2016). These ideas continue to hold currency in evangelical Christian doctrines and American civil religion (Harding 2001: 230; Bellah 1985: 220; Lucas 1992: 192). Everything happens for a reason means that even bad things are not truly bad because they have a higher purpose, it is all a part of God's plan (Bialecki 2007).

Soul contracts in spirituality seem to operate in a similar way to the Christian theological concept of providence but with reference to the universe rather than God; everything happens for a reason because it is all a part of the energy of the universe. It is elaborated in a way that is distinct from mainstream denominational Christianity, however. As previously outlined, in spirituality it is commonly held that each soul has lived many lifetimes already on this planet and others, and in this dimension and others (Bender 2007, 2010: 120-152). A version of the Indian religious concept of karma is also used, so that for some people who knew their past lives they talked about working through the karma of misdeeds in the past. My belly dance teacher told me that in a past life she had been a brutal Mongol warlord who had crossed Asia raping and pillaging creating ripples of karma throughout her lifetimes, which was why she had been raped herself in every subsequent lifetime. The cosmological scheme of reincarnation where deeds in one life determine the fate of the next lifetime also reflects the ancient Greek concept of metempsychosis, or transmigration of souls. An outline of this idea is found in the Myth of Er in Plato's Republic (1993: 371-379). This myth persisted in western esoteric circles influenced by Neoplatonism and combined with ideas that Jesus was a

gnostic teacher who taught reincarnation, a hidden truth that was removed from the Bible by the early Church Fathers (Hanegraaff 1996: 321).

The idea that action in past lives affects occurrences in subsequent lives follows the concept of energy. Living a lifetime like my belly dance teacher described, a brutal warlord raping and pillaging, created such a huge wave of negative energy that it resonated through every subsequent lifetime. Her soul contract involved suffering the same fate as her previous incarnation's victims. She told me this as a backstory to the narrative of how she had been raped in her current lifetime by her stepbrother. Providential ideas provide a framework for interpreting misfortune; a way of explaining why a bad thing happened. They can also provide a frame for why good things happen. Mikaelsson reads a "prosperity discourse" or consciousness in 'new age' literature, which promotes visualisation and affirmation as techniques for manifesting abundance (2001: 94-96). Prosperity is a reflection of emotional well-being and advanced spiritual development in a framework that explains why some are successful and some are not. It echoes the prosperity gospel in American Christianity, in which success and wealth are signs of God's grace (Bowler 2013; Coleman 2016). This line of thinking shifts the providential frame from being imposed by forces beyond the individual's control to being influenced by the individual's behaviour.

Affirmations and related techniques were advocated by proponents of New Thought in the 19th century (Albanese 2006: 395-447). New Thought proponents recommended clearing the channels of the mind to allow the divine energy of the universe to flow freely, a process of harmonisation that would ensure mental and physical health. Repeating positive phrases everyday was one way to open channels and so remain healthy. It was an important precursor of both evangelical Christianity and spirituality. It proved so popular that it ceased to be a separate phenomenon and became a general part of American culture (ibid: 436). The self was part of the divine; powerful, capable of shaping events. This concurred with the high-esteem Americans valued. Positive thinking proved so popular it has become an ideology in American culture that suggests that health, wealth, and success at work are all determined by a positive attitude (Ehrenreich 2009). When things happen for a reason but that reason is the individual's attitude then positive thinking becomes a moral imperative.

As with New Thought, positivity is bodily as well as mental. Cederström and Spicer talk about an ideology of wellness in American culture, which inculcates biomorality, the "moral demand to be happy and healthy" (2015: 5). It is a moral imperative to exercise, eat right, and look after the self; this imperative features strongly in spirituality. Poor health and emotional negativity have a low vibration that is a sign of a lack of spiritual development. Feeling bad and expressing negativity is a sign that you are a bad person. As Cederström and Spicer and Ehrenreich argue the primacy on wellness and positivity have economic advantages; it is a way of making the body and mind into products for use by employers. In capitalism, sickness is defined as the inability to work (Harvey 2000: 97-116; Berlant 2010: 28). Wellness makes productive workers; the sick must be managed by progressively more punitive policies to induce them to wellness. The effect of these ideologies is to make the individual responsible; their problems are not the result of economics or politics but the maladaptation of the individual. Collective engagement of social problems is collapsed into personal quests for the good life. Positivity and wellness ideologies can occlude social problems caused by neoliberal policies through suggesting that the cause and remedy are located in the individual and not the social.

Sickness, poverty, sadness all become personal failures in the ideologies of positivity and wellness. Failure is "America's greatest social taboo"; an "unmentionable subject" (Sennett 2007: 103). These ideologies are strong in spirituality, to the extent that narratives of spiritual paths involve rewriting of economic declines and downward social mobility as spiritual development, as explored in chapters two, six, and seven. In spirituality, since it is up to each individual to create their own reality as a happy one, it is their own fault if misfortune occurs. They are being too negative, bringing misfortune into their consciousness, and so causing bad things to happen. This ideology cannot be seen as separate from class structures and political economic realities in the US, the inequalities of which are blurred by the thinking that the root of all problems and also the solutions are within the self.

It seems we have come full circle from providence back to individual agency. This is because these two themes are not in opposition but two sides of the same coin. Schmidt traces a tension between surrender and independence in spiritual quests in 19th

century American spirituality (2012: 215). The passive acceptance and obedience to what one believes is countered by active searching and questions in "the tension between autonomy and self-surrender" (ibid: 224). Schmidt characterises it as embracing both "solitude and society" (ibid: 255). To put it another way, how is the self related to social structures? This is what I have characterised as the theme of providence and individual agency in spirituality, the tension of being both determined and undetermined, free but not free. To return to the cosmological principle in spirituality, the soul contract determines what happens in a lifetime, but that contract was still chosen and consented to by the individual soul prior to incarnation. Although there is the possibility open of not fulfilling a contract, that is part of the contract itself and again has already been agreed upon by the individual soul. Spirituality's providence is not bestowed by a transcendent divinity, but chosen by the immanent divinity of the universe, which is a reflection of the self. The universe is the individual; spirituality is a religion that makes the individual sacrosanct.

A Religion of Individuals?

Maria dropped me off in her 1974 brown station wagon at the house in Uptown where I was renting a room. My landlord, a man in his early 60s named Terry who came from California and now owned a home in the expensive end of Sedona, came out and critically appraised her car. He pointed to the tyres. They were very worn, the rims could be seen poking through the rubber, he said, which meant she was at risk from a blow out if she hit something. He recommended not going above 25-30mph until she had them replaced. Maria nodded tiredly and looked worried, mumbling something about how the car could not get much over 30 anyway. We said goodbye and she left. Inside the house, Terry was waiting. "Is Maria as poor as a church mouse?" he asked, and I said yes. He said he regretted telling her about the tyre then because she would not be able to afford to fix it. He asked why she did not have a job. I explained how she was pursuing an online course to become a doula and radical midwife, and that she felt it was against her spiritual path to do activities for money that were not fulfilling to her soul. Terry

indicated that he found this selfish and that he would get a job that was boring but not morally repugnant. He told me how after he was divorced he had $1.45 in his pocket, checked into a homeless shelter, and found a job to get back on his feet, walking to it every day because he did not have a car. Now he worked for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and had been able to afford to buy a house in "paradise". But the upcoming FEMA reorganisation meant there was very little work available. He only had three years until he could claim retirement, even so he was thinking of getting a job around town because the bills still had to be paid. Maria was endangering herself, he told me sternly, she was irresponsible, if she had skills she should earn money.

This incident highlights two different understandings of what it means to be an individual in American society. Terry's opinion echoes the importance of self-reliance and personal responsibility, which are central to the "grand narrative of American individualism" as traced by philosopher Stanley Cavell, who saw Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance as stemming from the ancient Greek ethic of self-care (Ladyga 2016: 179). Full citizenship rests on the ability to take care of the self; an argument used historically to justify slavery and the political exclusion of women and immigrants (Sennett 2003: 105; Jacobson 2000). Individuals must prove to society that they can look after themselves; that they are a fully functioning individual capable of working and paying for their own needs. This has become the argument for individuals paying for their own healthcare, education, and so on, indeed anything that in other political formations constitute the 'welfare state'. The political economic changes since the early 1970s that have been termed 'neoliberalism' were explicitly based on a formulation of society as an aggregate of individuals who held primary responsibility for their own needs (Wacquant 2009: 303).

Terry's condemnation of Maria is a clear reflection of this tradition; by not having a job she was not taking care of her needs, she was risking herself by being unable to replace a worn down tyre, moreover she was a risk to society because she was not taking personal responsibility. The interesting parallel is that in spirituality ascension is the responsibility of an aggregate of individuals working separately towards a common goal but not collectivising to work together on this goal. For Maria, she *was* being responsible for herself; by not working in a job that did not fulfil her spiritually

she was enacting a form of self-care. Taking care of herself as an individual meant *not* working a job only to pay bills. That would have been a form of spiritual oppression; working in that way would demean her spirit and therefore she would not be taking care of herself, moreover she would be holding up the spiritual evolution of the planet by not following her own spiritual path. Instead she was supported financially by her family and through piecemeal work as a teacher of yoga, martial arts, and circus arts. In her view, it was those who did not take care of their spiritual path who were being irresponsible. Despite the differences in interpretation, both of these views are rooted in the self as the primary constituent of the social. Both are motivated by the question, what is the best way to perform the self in society?

The foundational sociological work of Durkheim highlights how peculiarly 'modern' this question is. The underlying separation of social structures in Durkheim's work is between 'traditional' and 'modern' societies, with the main difference that modern society increases individuation compared to traditional (Giddens 1971: 216). This creates a problem, because for Durkheim, morality derives from group membership; individuation when it takes the form of egoism, the self-interest of individual in a utilitarian sense, undermines the moral basis of society and increases *anomie*, the isolation of the individual from the group and a root cause of human suffering (Durkheim 2010 [1953]: 17; Giddens 1971: 213). Despite his reputation as an anti-individualist thinker, Durkheim's solution to this quintessentially modern dilemma is the celebration of the individual; the individual not as single personality but 'man' in general, through a religion that consecrates, sacralises the individual. This "cult of the individual" is part of the social in modernity, collectively constituted and the basis of a "new secular morality" replacing traditional religions (Marske 1987: 3). Is this what spirituality provides? A religion for individuals, such as Maria, that celebrates the individual, providing a morality and way of working that fulfils their individual needs. Let us not forget that Durkheim located the changes in the division of labour as instrumental in the process of increasing individuation in modernity that resulted in social disorder (1964: 4-14). It is this juncture between political economy and religion in relation to the individual that I examine in reference to spirituality.

What is meant, then, by 'the self' and 'the individual'? This is a particularly

interesting question to explore in this cultural context, as there has been a rich strand of anthropological theorising about 'non-Western' concepts of the self and the individual that opposes them to 'Western' concepts. In Strathern's analysis Melanesian multiple persons are "dividual" rather than the Western "individual", who has a unitary self created through binary exclusions, a man is a man because he is not a woman, that are hierarchically related both to each other and in relation to society (1988: 13-15). In what she calls the "Western corollary", the difference between society and the individual is conceived in terms of modification and control; these separate and internally homogenous units interact with and upon each other. Strathern's intent was to elaborate Melanesian concepts of personhood not American concepts, but her work has been influential in subsequent theorising which repeatedly uses a rather unexamined notion of 'Western' ontology as its benchmark for describing the variety of 'non-Western' others. This 'Western' ontology features a strong unitary concept of 'the individual' as the only entity endowed with agency.

Strathern, alongside Wagner, Latour, and Gell, has been cited by Viveiros de Castro as the inspiration for what is labelled the "ontological turn" in anthropological theory (2015: 4). Anthropologists theorising in this current interpret social worlds as being fundamentally different rather than cultural differences being a matter of different perspectives or representations of the same world; it is a difference in the way things *are* and not in how they are "represented" or "constructed" (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2012, 2013, 2015; Holbraad 2009, 2013; Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Wagner 2012; Scott 2013). Scott's examination of this body of theory is particularly useful; he defines the ontological turn as "the investigation and theorization of diverse experiences and understandings of the nature of being itself" (2013: 859). Scott opposes the Cartesian or Kantian ontology to the "relational non-dualism" of the ontological turn (ibid: 862). What I find useful is that the list of characteristics that he assigns to relational non-dualism reflects in many ways the cosmology of spirituality. Spirituality is a similarly motivated "non-modern project" that equally comes from a criticism of 'Western' ontology as imperialistic and environmentally destructive[7] and favouring a

[7] Indeed, Hanegraaff notes that according to 'new age' writers the combination of Cartesian dualistic thinking and Christianity are the root of the problems experienced during the Age of Pisces, 1996: 323.

recombination of religion and science as does the ontological turn in Scott's analysis (ibid: 866).

To be clear, I am not adopting an ontological turn position myself, but simply remarking on its closeness to my informants' perspective. Terry's position resembles that of 'Western' ontology, whereas Maria's reflects one of relational non-dualism. To take just one aspect of their difference, for Terry material needs outweigh immaterial ones, which translates to his belief that having a job to support oneself financially is more important than following any spiritual path. This suggests he bases his view of reality on a binary split between immaterial and material, one of Scott's characteristics of the Cartesian/Kantian 'Western' ontology. Whereas Maria does not separate the material and immaterial, the two are intertwined as part of the interdependent energy of the universe. This translates into two different perspectives on the responsibility of the individual in society; Terry sees the individual as responsible for oneself and therefore to society, Maria sees the individual and society as one, taking care of herself spiritually is taking care of society.

While Scott's analysis remains modest in its proposals, other formulations assert that there are multiple ontologies or "worlds" undermining a notion of shared, empirical reality (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 478; Holbraad 2013: 470). This recalls Deb's advice to me on concluding our reading; that in Sedona I would encounter many different "truths", and I should hold on to mine and not let other truths overwhelm my personal sense of reality. This was a recurrent theme in my fieldwork that I will explore throughout this thesis; if the individual creates their own reality and each person intuits their own truth, what happens when these 'truths' collide? It is interesting to think through this theme in relation to the work of Viveiros de Castro, Strathern, and their colleagues because the analytical tools of the ontological turn and its antecedents were developed in order to understand the social reality of 'non-Western' others far removed from the cultural centres of anthropological theory, such as Amazonians and Highland Papua New Guineans. The otherness of the theory reflects the otherness of their informants. Whereas my informants are perhaps as close to the anthropological stereotype of 'Westerners' as it is possible to get; they are white, relatively affluent, educated in rational empirical frameworks, benefitting from the multiple comforts and

conveniences of 'civilisation'. They are Americans; why should they inhabit an ontology akin to what Viveiros de Castro and his theoretical kin would see as their inverse? The answer to this, perhaps, is contained within Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism; that representation of the other mirrors the self (1998: 92). I argue that the representation of others in spirituality is just this; 'non-Western' others, especially Native Americans, are used as sources of 'ancient wisdom' that are retooled for what they can offer moderns in their own attempt to be non-modern 'primitives'. It is revealing that the result of this is an ontology very similar to that proposed by the theoretical stance of the ontological turn.

Returning to the idea of 'the individual', I previously suggested that agency is a defining feature of this idea in the 'Western' or Cartesian ontology. But before suggesting who or what has it, first it needs to be examined what is meant by agency. Gell defines agency as that which is "seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events. An agent is one who 'causes events to happen' in their vicinity" (1998: 16). An agent is not necessarily a human person, indeed the main thrust of Gell's argument is that objects can act as agents. This theory of agency is elaborated in this thesis in relation to spirituality, most directly in chapters two and four, but recurring throughout the remaining chapters as well. The theme of the expansion of agency to nonhuman actors, decentring the human, in the ontological turn is particularly useful in examining my informants' statements that crystals, rocks, and 'Sedona' have agency (see Latour 2004, 2009; Ingold 2000; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2013).

The usefulness of certain propositions suggested by anthropologists working in a broadly identified ontological turn to this thesis' analysis of spirituality is generated by a common history, that of philosophical Idealism. At the root of both spirituality and the ontological turn is the proposition that "ideas generate realities" (Graeber 2015a: 21). Idealism comes to spirituality through the historical root of western esotericism in Neoplatonism (Hanegraaff 1996: 388-392; von Stuckrad 2005: 12-30). The theoretical orientations of this thesis are politically and historically situated, using ideology rather than ontology as an analytical framework. Ideology refers to those shared assumptions and generalisations in a given context that simplify and reduce the complexities of social

reality. But ideology is more than statements about social reality, as Žižek elaborates, "ideology is not constituted by abstract propositions in themselves, rather, ideology is itself this very texture of the lifeworld which "schematizes" the propositions, rendering them "livable"" (2010: 3). Rules and rituals are how ideology is lived, concealing the violence of social structures through "invisible mystification" (ibid: 4). Žižek goes on to call "new age" an ideology that celebrates the body as the path to enlightenment not through discipline and effort but through the "insight that we already are divine and perfect"; it is "the 'spiritual logic of late capitalism' uniting spirituality and earthly pleasures, transcendence and material benefits, divine experience and unlimited shopping" (ibid: 7).

In his analysis of 'new age' as ideology, Žižek echoes sociological critiques of spirituality that it is a consumerist commodification of religion (Lau 2000: 2-12; Carrette and King 2004: 150-162; Possamai 2003: 40; York 2001: 367-368). Žižek's own critique is brief and does not address religion substantively; however, the sociological critiques do but from an unsustainable assumption that 'real' religion is somehow different from and superior to 'fake' spirituality. In analysing spirituality in terms of ideology, I do not mean to reproduce these critiques and reduce the transformative appeal of spirituality to mere consumerism. Taking care of the self spiritually is a radical reformulation of the relationship between the individual and society; but spirituality also operates ideologically, blurring the inequalities inherent in the social reality of American late capitalism. To return to the example of Maria, her commitment to her spiritual path meant taking care of herself spiritually and therefore refusing to participate in work that was not consonant with that aim. However, she would not have been able to take care of herself at all had her home not been bought for her by her aunt, who required only a token rent payment which she paid herself if Maria could not cover it. Her aunt worked as a corporate lawyer in a large insurance firm. This employment was disdained as contrary to spirituality by Maria; however, she would not have been able to follow her spiritual path without it.

This is not to suggest that Terry was any less or more contradictory in his outlook than Maria. Indeed, in comparing Maria's attitude to work with Terry's, two interlinked ideologies are highlighted; spirituality and the American dream. Terry's

assumption that paradise is available to anyone who has the skills to work hard and achieve it is equally mystifying of social reality. The American dream resists easy definition because it is ideology[8]. Graeber refers to it obliquely when discussing the differences between Azande statements about witchcraft and everyday practice; "in our own society...it's commonplace to make equally absurd generalizations ("anyone who's sufficiently determined and genuinely believes in themselves can become successful")—despite the obvious day-to-day reality that, even if every single person in the country woke up one morning determined to become the next Sir Richard Branson, society is so arranged that there would still have to be bus drivers, janitors, nurses, and cashiers" (2015a: 3). The American dream reduces the problem of how the individual and society should relate to an essence; the hard working individual earns the benefits of society; the agency of the individual is symbolised by the things and relationships he has; the happy family, the expensive car, the house with the white picket fence.

What this ideology mystifies is that many people - bus drivers, janitors, nurses, cashiers - work hard without ever earning as much as the Richard Bransons. These two categories, manual workers on one hand and wealthy businesspeople on the other, are related unequally in economic, social, and political terms; it is a relationship of class. The importance of class, as a social structure obscured by individual-focused ideologies, is explored throughout this thesis. Graeber's comment is illustrative because the American dream suggests that what elevates successful people is hard work and will; but as Graeber points out, society is structured in such a way that this is not possible. Sennett's work on class in America is foundational to the exploration of these issues. The meritocracy of the American dream suggests that the masses have less because they have less ability (Sennett and Cobb 1972: 68). But class is, Sennett argues, a "check" on freedom because it is internalised as individual responsibility (ibid: 28).

Ideology denies social structural conditions; "the class structure is in America is organized so that the tools of freedom become sources of indignity" (ibid: 30). The individual is responsible for their class position and economic security; being middle

[8] There is no definitive definition of the American dream; it remains elusive. There is perhaps an interesting parallel here between the inconclusive searching after a dream and the persistent seeking for spirituality; for a discussion of "seekers" in the history of American spirituality see Schmidt 2012: 228-229. Indeed, Schmidt locates the action of seeking for ultimate meaning in his definition of religion. America, as an equally abstract notion, arguably also requires the perpetual seeking for ultimate meaning.

class comes from a power within the self, "class and self [are] joined" in American dream ideology (ibid: 36). Sennett is saying that the self in a class society is not free; it is in a sense powerless. Spirituality denies class; there is no inequality, its appearance is an illusion of the 3D. The cosmology of spirituality has no space to map social inequality. Ascension dissolves class divisions and inequality; by taking care of the self spiritually social inequality will be transcended. Paying attention to social inequality is being bound by 3D concepts; instead those on the spiritual path should pay attention to the self. The self in spirituality is seen as separate from job or class. In both spirituality and the American dream, the individual self, not society, is the locus of change and power.

In suggesting the American dream and spirituality are intertwined what I am exploring is this central question of what is the self and how does it relate to the social. The self is the core of the individual; society is composed of individuals. This view of society as an aggregate of individuals is the product of the historical tradition named "individualism", a term coined by de Tocqueville in reference to the social atomisation

A mural on the side of the Center for the New Age.

he observed in America (Sennett 2003: 105). The American citizen is individual; both an independent agent and a productive worker, one necessitates the other. Living the American dream is inextricably linked to employment. The spiritual path, on the other hand, is more of a vocation as opposed to 'career' in the sense of gradually adding value rather than chasing upward social mobility and acquiring material things (Sennett 2008: 264). This thesis explores the extent to which those involved in spirituality turn away from employment-as-career because careers essentially no longer exist, having been replaced with short-term, contingent jobs without benefits or much prospect of advancement. The effects of neoliberalism mean that the American dream is under negotiation. My informants rejected the idea that the meaning of life was the competition for material success, they no longer believed in the American dream. Spirituality is what they turned to following the death of this dream.

Spirituality and Neoliberalism: an argument

The central argument of this thesis is that despite proposing a radical reformulation of society, the old paradigm replaced by the new paradigm, spirituality is a product of neoliberal late capitalism. The theoretical delimitation of neoliberalism will be explored more extensively in chapter seven, but in brief it is a form of pure capitalism replacing the "social capitalism" of early 20th century, where inequality is extreme (Sennett 2006: 82; Bourdieu 1998: 96). This thesis examines what effect this has had on religion. What does spirituality tell us about inequality? Is spirituality what a religion of individuals looks like, as neoliberalism is economics for a society of individuals?

This argument rests on the historical argument made in Graeber's *Debt* that analyses the interaction of markets, currency, and economics with other social forms, suggesting that Eurasian history (including the USA post-conquest) can be broken down into cycles of virtual, credit currency in the form of IOUs alternating with currency in the form of metal coinage (2011: 214). The most recent transition in this cycle started in 1971 when Richard Nixon abandoned the gold standard, precipitating "yet another phase of virtual money" (ibid). This date, 1971, also marks approximately the emergence of

'new age' spirituality, arguably the product of the same historical conditions (Huss 2014: 53). Spirituality is the complement to neoliberalism; the spiritual side of its pure materialism. In reference to the "Axial Age" (800 BC-600 AD) emergence of markets alongside the new philosophical and religious movements of Buddhism, Christianity, and Confucianism, Graeber remarks that "if one relegates a certain social space simply to the selfish acquisition of material things, it is almost inevitable that soon someone else will come to set aside another domain in which to preach that, from the perspective of ultimate values, material things are unimportant, that selfishness - or even the self - are illusory, and that to give is better than to receive" (2011: 249). The neoliberal expansion of the size and influence of financial institutions, where the market and capitalism operate as the central "organizing principle" for all things, was accompanied by the growth of conservative evangelical Christianity (ibid: 377). This thesis argues that it was also accompanied by the rise of spirituality, an ideology that suggests that each person creates their own reality. This places ultimate responsibility in the individual. However, what I wish to highlight through the epigraph to this introduction is that the ability to create reality is a mark of power; whose reality is accepted as valid is an exercise of power. The sovereign determines what currency is valid; to be sovereign is to have the power to define (ibid: 46-50). In spirituality, it is suggested that each person is a god or goddess, in effect, each person is sovereign in their own personal definition of the universe. This thesis explores the consequences of this ideological supposition. This thesis makes a contribution to scholarship through this application of political economic theory to ethnographic data on spirituality in Northern Arizona, addressing an ellipsis in many prior analyses of 'new age' spirituality (Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2013: 8).

Before it is possible to socially embed spirituality in this way, first I will take a closer look at what I have suggested is the primary unit of spirituality; the individual spiritual path. What is interesting about spiritual paths is that even though theoretically absolutely anything can constitute them, the form they take is in fact quite conventional within the cultural terms available. What I mean by this is that individual spiritual paths follow well-worn cultural narratives available to Americans. These narratives form a hermeneutic for constructing past events in a way that emphasises individual agency, the

spiritual path followed individual choices. However at the same time, they create a providential frame through narrating how these choices were essentially predetermined. So what I am looking at is how one particular spiritual path, that of Peter, a retired lawyer living in Sedona, navigated these themes of individual agency and providence, weaving a narrative through the available cultural 'plots', to address the central theoretical question of how the individual relates to society in this context. To do this, I use the theoretical work of Bruner on the narrative construction of reality. Bruner suggests that narrative is a culturally conventional form, and individuals retroactively fit life events into narratives in order to come to an understanding of their particular experience of "reality" (1991: 4). Narratives and events mutually constitute each other; "narrative organizes the structure of human experience - how, in a word, "life" comes to imitate "art" and vice versa" (ibid: 22). This theory sheds particularly revealing light on the spiritual path of Peter, who self-consciously and explicitly constructs his life as a story for the purpose of gaining attention and entertaining himself and others.

21st December 2012: "This Is My Story, Not Yours"

"Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person – you called him crazy…" Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, 1949, p. 39.

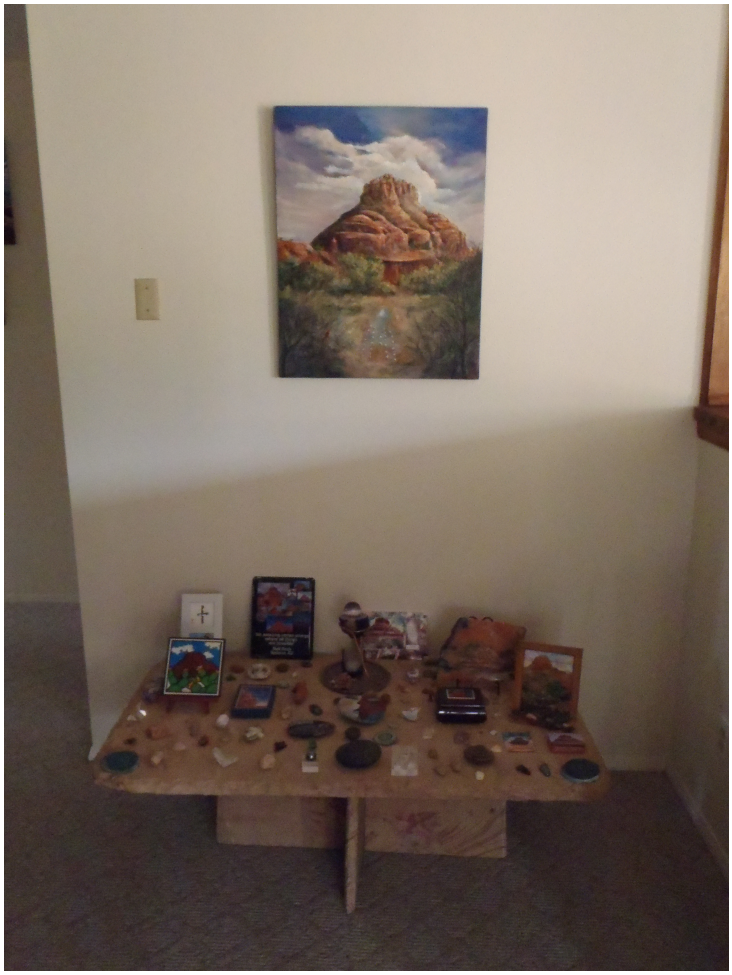
To the Top of Bell Rock

Peter Gersten leads a group towards Bell Rock.

On 21st December 2012, Bell Rock, one of Sedona's vortexes, was scattered with small groups of onlookers around the base, some sat on deck chairs, others with binoculars. Representatives of the media stayed in the parking lots at the two adjacent trail heads situated about half a mile to the north and south of the rock, speaking into cameras that

were aimed at the top. A fire engine, ambulance, and Forest Service Rangers in pickup trucks were also located in the southern parking lot, called Bell Rock Vista. The lots themselves were congested with cars. On the top was a fluid group of 10-20 people that came and left during the day. A police helicopter hovered in the sky. All of these spectators had come to this conical red rock looking for something to happen, an event much hyped in the local and national media in the preceding weeks and months. However, it was not the vaunted supernatural energy of the rock that drew them, but a socially created event. They were waiting to see if Peter Gersten would jump off the 479ft rock to activate a portal that he would travel through to go to the source code that creates this simulated reality and remove the virus that is currently threatening our existence.

The 21st December 2012 was commonly held to be the end of the Mayan Long Count calendar and was identified by many in Sedona as a significant date when the



Representations of Bell Rock in Peter's apartment.

ascension would begin or the world would end (Sitler 2006; Aveni 2009; Gelfer 2014; Whitesides 2015; Wilson 2013; Larsen 2013; Rough 2013; Mayer 2013). For Peter, it was the date his portal would open. It was a clear blue day, with few clouds and clement weather for December in Northern Arizona. That morning at 10am, Peter set off from his apartment in the Village of Oak Creek with a group of nine other people. Peter lived no more than twenty minutes from Bell Rock, and it was something of an obsession for him. He hiked it every day, sometimes twice a day, in the weeks running up to the 21st. He called his apartment a "shrine", it was decorated with images and representations of Bell Rock in all manner of media: photos, paintings, drawings, copper, fabric, ceramics, stained glass, embossed brass, nails, on playing cards and oracle cards, on a box of teabags. The window of the main room of his two-bedroom apartment looked out directly onto Forest Service land and the imposing shape of Bell loomed in the centre. He believed he had been given this apartment the previous January by Sedona as part of his preparations for the 21st, why else would he have been given such a prime location for ascending Bell unless he was meant to be up there on that date? He thought of 'Sedona' as a high energy lifeform that oversaw his programme in the simulation that provided plot twists for him to learn from. If he was given a specific apartment, it was for a personally meaningful reason.

Many of the nine people who climbed up with him had ascended Bell Rock with Peter before. He had been on a mission since late August 2012 to take as many people to the top of Bell Rock as possible. He believed this would aid him in activating the portal because each person's frequency would help raise the vibration of the energy at the top thus increasing the likelihood of the portal opening there. He had taken up friends, family members, and random strangers he met on the trails while hiking but most of his companions had come through a website called www.couchsurfing.org. Peter listed on his hosting profile this site that in exchange for a free place to stay, they would have to climb to the top of Bell Rock with him, and did not accept requests from people he did not think were fit or able enough to get to the top. He referred to people who successfully reached the top with him as "club members"; they were always welcome to return to stay with him and he would do anything he could to help them out because he saw the act of climbing Bell Rock with him as a benefit to his ultimate aim of activating

the portal on the 21st December. Indeed, he called the Couchsurfers website itself a portal, an entranceway, to see who Sedona would send to him.

The nine people who climbed with him on the 21st all had different personal connections to Peter, yet collectively represented the sort of heterogeneity typical of social gatherings in Sedona. His nephew, Chad, had flown in from Miami where he worked as a technical director in sports broadcasting with the Miami Heat basketball team and as a freelance videographer and photographer. His main concern was the safety of his uncle; he did not share Peter's beliefs and was worried by what might happen that day. Joseph, from Scottsdale, was a friend of Peter's who told me he was ex-Marine Corps and a film-maker; although Peter later told me he never actually made any films except a YouTube video for Peter detailing his "leap of faith". He went on to work as a solar panel salesman. He did not pay tax and owed the IRS $80,000; he identified himself as a tax protestor who does not accept the legitimacy of the IRS. He had an interest in channelling, having read The Hathor Material and had tried the practice himself (see Kenyon and Essene 1996). He believed a portal could open. Solomon was an old friend of Peter's, who had known him 20 years. He was Italian-American, retired, living mostly in Phoenix, coming up to Sedona a couple of days a week. I knew him independently of Peter from kundalini yoga class. He took Peter's beliefs with good-hearted humour. Sally and Summer were two young women in their early 20s, both blonde, in a relationship with each other, who had previously stayed with Peter through couchsurfing and climbed Bell Rock with him then. They met through contributing to the same blog that focused on spiritual concerns. They were both from the East Coast, at the time they were driving around the country and making money from selling handmade jewellery. They had driven for 15 hours from Texas and arrived that morning. Sally had previously told me they thought it was really important to be here on the 21st and see what happened with Peter. The other three people who accompanied Peter were a film crew from Arizona State University, who had been employed by two other ASU students who had couchsurfed with Peter and were making a documentary on eschatological beliefs in 2012, the two club members were in Mexico at the time covering the Rainbow Gathering held near Chichen Itza, and sent some colleagues of theirs to cover Sedona. They were there purely as observers, and seemed

the least invested in the whole affair. The remaining two people in the party were Peter himself, a 70-year old retired Jewish lawyer from New York City, and me.

It was Peter's intention to stay on Bell Rock for 13hrs, from 11am to 12 midnight. He thought that the portal would open at either 11:11am or 11:11pm, so he had to be there for both times. He called 11:11 his "magic number". The winter solstice in 2012 was at 11:11am UTC (Coordinated Universal Time) on 21st December, which Peter claimed was the reason why it was a significant date, not because the Mayan calendar ended then. However, 11:11am UTC was actually 4:11am Arizona time, and Peter said he did not want to be up on the rock in the middle of the night, so he said it would open at 11:11 Arizona time either am or pm because it was his story and he was in this particular time zone. When the morning came he was so excited that he said we should leave earlier than planned at 10am, reaching the northern parking lot, Courthouse Vista, shortly afterwards.

Climbing up, Peter tried to change his usual route. He started us off climbing the west side along the Forest Service trail. Then he could not remember the way to the top from there, so we ended up skirting the base through the trees to the bottom of the sheer rock face or crevice section, and then going up the normal way. We walked in single file, Peter going first carrying his huge bag, packed with everything he might need for a prolonged stay, with someone else carrying the back; Chad, Joseph, Solomon, and I took turns helping him carry the other end of the bag. Solomon kept making joking references to Christ's ascent to Calvary as we walked up; as we began he said "Peter, your disciples follow you!" adding that 12 and 13 did not show up. Then again as he carried the bag he cried "we're carrying the cross here!" According to Sally, it did seem, as we followed him in single file with the bag first, that we were in a procession heading towards something significant. When we reached the top, there was a man talking on his mobile phone standing on a rock plinth to the right of us. He saw us, climbed down, and asked "are you Peter? I've been waiting to meet you."

This man, Jason, was one of seven people already at the top when we reached it that morning. He was from Phoenix, and he said he had been seeing 11:11 occur in his life for 7 years, first on digital clock displays and then it seemed ubiquitous. He felt drawn to come to Sedona and climb Bell Rock for the 21st. His mother was a psychic

and she had brought him to Sedona for visits for years, although this was his first time up Bell Rock. He was a 30-year old tattooist, his legs and arms were covered in tattoos, including an "11:11" on his forearm. He said that his whole life was on the designs on his legs. He had heard of Peter on the internet but never contacted him, he said he knew that a lot of weirdoes would have contacted him and he was not like that. He was there of his own volition, not coordinated with Peter in any way, but drawn by the same impulse and feeling as Peter, he said. The other six people were over on the top doing qigong and yoga poses, including headstands and shoulder stands at the edge. Two of them had contacted Peter before and said they were there for him, although Peter told me he did not understand in what sense they meant. I spoke to them and they said they were here to support Peter and what he was doing, and then they said they were waiting for a spaceship. The others said they were there to see what happened. A number of other people both familiar and unfamiliar to Peter came up to the top in the lead up to 11:11am. One man, who said he was just there to meditate, was very smartly dressed; Peter whispered to me that he was probably an undercover policeman because his formal attire seemed out of place.

Peter had sent out an invitation on his website, now taken down, two years prior

The summit of Bell Rock, and to the right, the plinth that Peter called the "top"

inviting people to come to Sedona on 21st December 2012 to await an "extraordinary event". He received a lot of online communication from a wide variety of people who had seen his video explaining his "leap of faith" or had read about him elsewhere on the internet or heard about him through word of mouth. Peter had had at least three interviews in the week preceding the 21st, for Phoenix newspapers and online radio shows, there were articles about him in the press across Arizona, elsewhere in the US, and internationally. One man emailed Peter and offered to sell all his possessions and join him, if he got reassurance from Peter that the portal truly would open. Peter told him not to come if he needed reassurance; it had to be a personal decision based on faith. It had become something of a media event. Peter commented to me on the hype, and complained that all they cared about was the "leap of faith", they just wanted to see something happen, they wanted to see if he would jump, and then laugh at him if he did not. Throughout the day he received calls and texts from unknown numbers asking if he had jumped yet. Peter ignored the texts and if he answered the phone he would reply something nonsensical such as "Jim's not here!" and hang up.

As 11:11am approached, we all went to the circular plinth that Peter called the top. It was not the actual summit; that was several feet away and could only be reached using ropes and harnesses. Peter called a plinth to the side of the summit the "top" because that was the highest that could be reached free climbing. Peter stood on the raised stone platform in the centre of the plinth, surrounded by everyone else in a ring around the edge of the plinth. A police helicopter hung in the sky, hovering close to Bell. On either side of Bell, to the south and north that I could see, people sat, some looking up and waiting to see if someone would jump. Peter stood with his arms outstretched, looking up to the sky. 11:11 came, and then passed, and nothing happened. Peter climbed down to the saddle and sat on the ground, with his back against the rock outcrop. The police helicopter went away and many of the spectators went home, between 50-100, as did a number of the people in our group, including Sally, Summer, and Solomon.

The commonly spread story had been that Peter was planning to jump off Bell Rock because it was the end of the world. In his initial YouTube video about the "leap of faith", he says that he will jump off Bell Rock to open a portal. He later recanted this

intention, after pressure from his daughter and other family members. He did not want to upset his daughter and he was afraid his family would put him on a psychiatric hold for the 21st so he would not be able to be on Bell Rock. Instead he said he would go to the top and wait for an extraordinary event to happen, which he believed would be the opening of a portal that he would step through to reach the source code at the centre of this simulated reality and remove the virus that threatened our existence. He speculated this extraordinary event could be something else though; he suggested it could be the appearance of Jason on the top independently of him, or all of the couchsurfers that came into his life during that period. But crucially, he said he was not going to jump to precipitate the extraordinary event. He would require something to physically happen before he acted and get three independent verifications from other people that they could see it too. There seemed to be a palpable sense of disappointment from onlookers and some people on the top; the hyped event had not happened. However, Peter had been clear in interviews and in person that he was not going to jump unless something extraordinary happened. The police had questioned both Peter and me the week before the 21st, they asked him directly if he would jump and he said no. We had also taken a member of Yavapai County Sheriff's department up to the top of Bell Rock the day before, ostensibly on reconnaissance in case someone got stuck or lost on the 21st so they knew the way, but Peter speculated this officer was also assessing him and his mental state.

While Peter was clear about his intentions not to jump unless he saw something extraordinary occur, word of his beliefs had spread and were having an effect on others in the local area. While most people reacted with scepticism or curiosity, there was one person on Bell Rock that day who seemed to be taking it more seriously. Eric had come up before 11:11am, and talked to various people about complicated arbitrary numerical calculations which he claimed indicated that the 21st would be the end of the world. He was a homeless man from Portland, Oregon, who had been sleeping up on Bell Rock for the previous few nights. He said he had read about Peter on the internet. When the film crew were filming interviews with Peter and a few others in the group, this man became increasingly vocal about "what needed to be done" and saying he wanted to talk to Peter. It seemed like he was saying he was going to help Peter by jumping and that

would reveal what kind of cancer Peter had. Peter had had a malignant tumour in his neck that had been successfully removed in January 2012, but one of the rumours was that he was going to jump because he was dying of cancer. The film crew packed up, saying they thought they were making the situation worse and they were going to stop filming. Peter angrily confronted Eric and told him not to jump; he yelled at Eric, "This is my story, not yours! Stay out of my story! Get your own!" There was a tense moment then Eric asked if Peter was God, Peter replied that he was not, and Eric asked, "then how can you tell me what to do?"

Eric then withdrew and laid under his blanket, a practice he called "meditating". Joseph and I went to talk to him, trying to calm him and talk to him about his beliefs and where he was from, advising him that no one wanted him to jump. He was angry with Peter after this rejection, and there was some concern he might harm Peter. Every so often he would walk over to the edge and stand there looking down, saying he would take the "Superman route" down. Peter called the police, he was afraid he would be held legally responsible if Eric jumped. Search and Rescue came up and spoke to him for about five minutes, concluded he was not going to jump, and went back down. Then a friend of Joseph's came up, carrying a staff with a fuzzy tail attached that he called "Mr Otter", and he sat down with Eric for several hours and talked to him. After they finished talking, Eric was gradually integrated into the group as the day wore away.

As the sun set, a large aura formed around the moon in a white perfect circle above us. Eric cried out that it was the portal. Peter agreed jokingly and said it would descend down onto us. Peter's ironic dismissal immediately undermined Eric and he did not hold on to the idea that it was the portal. It was the reflection of the moon on ice crystals in the clouds, I later found out. It got cold after nightfall; we wrapped up in sleeping bags and several layers of clothing, eating snacks, smoking marijuana, but not really talking anymore. The crisis had passed and it was a very calm and still night. A couple of times Eric said he saw something, but each time it was dismissed as nothing by Peter. It got to 11:11pm and Peter played the soundtrack from *Close Encounters of a Third Kind* on his iPad, which was creepy music, but he stayed where he sat and again nothing happened. It got to 11:50pm and Peter said we should get ready and go. Eric stayed up on the top and Peter left him his sleeping bag. He did not want to haul his bag

down in the dark so his stuff was all left up there. We climbed down in the dark quickly with little ceremony. I was relieved to get back on the ground after 14 hours on top of a rock, but Peter said little. He made a joke about his headlamp being the portal that would move us into the light. We drove back to his apartment, ate a sandwich, and then everyone went home. When I got back to my house I checked Facebook and Peter had posted a picture of Marvin the depressed robot from the movie *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* with the comment "I didn't win".

The Idiosyncratic Belief System of Peter Gersten

These events occurred because of a specific prediction Peter made about what would happen on 21st December 2012. This prediction was part of a larger plot, which he called "my story". He purposefully framed what he was doing as narrative while simultaneously narrating it on social media and through media interviews. As such, using Bruner's work on how narrative "operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality" offers insight into understanding how Peter framed his story and what his purpose was (1991: 6). Bruner outlines ten features of narrative as a guide for the social scientific analysis of this process (ibid: 6-19). Some of these features can be used as tools for helping to understand how Peter constructed his life as a story.

Peter Gersten was born in New York City in 1942 to a Jewish family and lived most of his adult life in that city. He was educated at SUNY Syracuse, UC San Diego, and the Brooklyn College of Law. During my fieldwork, he was a public defender in Navajo County, adjacent to Yavapai and Coconino counties where Sedona is located. He used to work there full-time, then when he reached retirement he was 'rehired' in his old position doing part-time hours because the economic crisis meant Navajo County could not afford to replace him with another full-time attorney. He said that this role required him to mostly represent members of the Navajo and Hopi tribes for alcohol-related crimes such as driving under the influence (DUI), aggravated DUI, and domestic violence. He worked in the courts in Winslow and Holbrook which are on the border with the Navajo Nation where alcohol is banned, so they come to border towns to buy

alcohol and the result is a slew of public order offences in those towns involving Native Americans. He said he liked this work because it was easy; most of his clients were guilty so all he had to do was advise them to sign plea deals. It allowed him plenty of time to pursue his real passion, hiking in Sedona.

Before he moved to Arizona, Peter was a criminal prosecutor in New York City, working mostly on murder cases. In the 1980s, he became known as "the UFO lawyer", because he petitioned the government for release of files about investigations into UFOs and aliens. He had one successful case of this kind. However, he said these cases were pointless because the government did not release anything, they are only required by the Freedom of Information Act to do a "reasonable search". Then they do not find anything, because according to Peter the people looking do not have the clearance to find anything. He pursued these cases because he found it suspicious that the government said absolutely nothing about sightings. The last case he had of this kind was in 2000. For his part, he did not believe that extraterrestrial beings were visiting the earth; the UFOs that people saw were only lights in the sky and triangles. However, they were real because people do see objects that they cannot identify; he just did not believe these objects were alien craft. The UFO people, such as the Mutual UFO Network, initially liked him because he gave them credibility but then they backed away from him when he started talking about 2012 and the simulation, because he was apparently too crazy for them. Peter told me that UFOs are planted in the simulation by whoever is running it to cover up their existence as watchers, he called it the perfect cover; create a phenomenon that most people dismiss as ridiculous to disguise their true purpose.

The stated motivation for his UFO investigations was publicity and attention; these were his main aims on the 21st December 2012 as well. The purpose of his spiritual path was to get attention; however, he did not see what he did as spirituality but as his "story". As he declared on the top of Bell Rock to Eric, this was his story. Yet it seemed to me his story followed a structure common to those involved in spirituality; he gave up a successful career as a New York prosecutor and worked as a public defender just to be comfortable, creating and publicising his story was more important than his career. Before coming to Sedona, he had engaged in many practices that fall within the rubric of spirituality, including vision quests, holistic 'wellness' retreats, and UFO

investigations. On a visit to Sedona, he had an epiphany that reality was a simulation and he had a special mission within it. This precipitated his move to the town. This structure has a degree of what Bruner calls "genericness", stories in a given contexts form "recognizable "kinds" of narrative" (1991: 14). In spirituality this pattern occurred in many of my informants' narratives of how they started on their spiritual path; the abandonment of a successful career because it was unsatisfying, followed by a period of seeking, then finding Sedona serendipitously and preferring the comfort and peace of living there than the material rewards of the previous career. As such, Peter's claim that what he did was not 'spirituality' is akin to Fundamentalist Christians who claim they are not a religion, because from their perspective, what they believe is the truth not "religion" (Harding 2001: 140). From an analytic perspective what Peter calls "his story" is his spiritual path.

The central plot in Peter's story is the premise that this reality that we perceive is a simulation; it is a holographic reality, a "cosmic computer program". It is created like any computer programme from a source code. Knowing the source code grants the ability to change anything in this reality or travel anywhere in time and space. This is what Peter aimed to do on 21st December, reach the source code that lies at the galactic core through a portal so he could change this reality, essentially reprogramming it. It was created by an intelligent life form with advanced technology that could somehow transform energy into matter. Everything in the simulation is an energy pattern that vibrates at a certain frequency. The frequency determines what sort of experience is created in the simulation, and that depends on the being in the simulation. Each person thus creates their own reality in the simulation; they have already consented to everything that happens within it. Everyone writes their own story. This uses the language of spirituality – energy, frequency, vibration – and the individualist moral imperative that each person is responsible for creating their own reality, as such Peter's beliefs fit comfortably within the cosmology of spirituality described in the introduction.

What was distinctive about Peter's framing was the insistence that it was all a story. He told me he wanted to write his story but he was no good at writing, so he decided to live it instead. And not just live it, publicise it through social media as well so others could hear about it. As such, Peter's spiritual path, his story, can be read as

autobiography because he was constructing his version of reality as a narrative about himself. Reading Peter's story as autobiography fits with the primacy of the individual in his beliefs because autobiography is the literary construct that lionises (however questionably) the autonomous individual (Couser 1989: 12-13; Bérubé 2000: 341). Couser argues that this makes autobiography the most American of literary forms, especially the narrative of the success story based on individual ability (1989: 248). Peter's story is a variant of this well-worn cultural narrative; the individual saving the collective, a familiar tale told about many culture heroes and religious icons from Jesus to Benjamin Franklin. It was interpreted this way by other participants through mutually understood Christian referents, such as Solomon's comments about Peter's disciples and carrying the cross. Significantly, this cultural narrative was placed in an eschatological frame, enhancing his messianic status.

Individual choice concerning what happens in one's life was in many ways a moral imperative for Peter. He would often comment when bad things happened that he chose this event so there was some lesson to learn from it, and would then spend time musing on what this lesson was that he had programmed for himself to learn from. He once asked rhetorically why anyone would choose a "crappy simulation"; this was in reference to a conversation about his clients in Navajo County, many of whom lived lives of abysmal poverty. He concluded that there must be something they thought they needed to learn from that existence. He called his life his ideal reality; residing in a beautiful, sunny place with plentiful hiking, happy and healthy in his 70s, with friends to share his time and pursuits. Morality is in the individual taking care of himself and creating his best life possible. This allowed Peter to ignore any structural causes of, say, poverty, or his complicity in the criminal justice system that discriminates against Native Americans (Deloria and Lytle 1983; Lakota People's Law Project 2015; Wacquant 2009: 113-150). Instead, he got to focus on the good things in life and declare his perfect.

Peter created the narrative of his story through denial; a systematic process of ignoring the things that did not fit into his idealised view of his reality or reinterpreting them so they did. Numerous instances of this were evident to me on the 21st December, such as why the portal would open at 11:11am Arizona time and not any other time

zone's 11:11, or why 11:11 at all; when Eric saw a circle in the sky and called it a portal but Peter did not; even to call that plinth the "top" of Bell Rock when it was clearly not, it was just the part he could reach free climbing. Peter was upfront about this selectivity; the simulation is limited to his perception of reality because it only creates his present moment. Only what can be sensed by the individual has to be created by the simulation, if something cannot be perceived, it essentially does not exist. Everything that he experienced fit into the narrative of his story because it was his version of the simulation, by definition nothing would happen in it that was irrelevant to him. He was the main character in his own story; everything that happened revolved around him. This demonstrates the narrative feature of "hermeneutic composability" where elements are "selected and shaped" according to the requirements of the meaning of the story (Bruner 1991: 7-8). While in the cold light of anthropological analysis, it seems like denial born of privilege to claim that Navajos living with alcoholism chose a "crappy simulation" to learn a lesson; in terms of Peter's story, it was part of how he produced the morality of individual responsibility. Each person chose their reality in the simulation; therefore unpleasant realities were lessons to be learned.

Peter was a prolific user of Facebook; this was how he published his story. As well as pictures of people hiking Bell, he often posted stories from various internet sites citing studies performed by physicists and philosophers that we do indeed live in a simulated reality. At the same time, he said proof of this would be suppressed because one of the premises of the simulation is that most people do not realise it is a simulation. Although he had no formal scientific training, Peter's beliefs are in line with certain scientific postulations concerning multiverses made by quantum physicists and philosophers such as Bostrum's "simulation argument" (Bostrum 2003; Barrow 2007; Rubenstein 2012, 2014). In Rubenstein's analysis, the relationship between science and religion is dialectical; the Big Bang hypothesis mirrored 'orthodox' Christian theology of ex nihilo creation. Scientists in the 20th century attempted to overcome the implication of a supreme being through speculating about multiverses where every possibility of the law of physics is played out (Rubenstein 2012: 500-507). Rubenstein does not mention spirituality, however, it seems to me a religious reflection of the combination of string theory, quantum mechanics, and modern cosmology that she

describes; where the universe is a self-contained oneness so God is no longer required to create the universe, God is the universe. Peter's innovation is to describe the individual within this self-contained oneness as a simulation, analogous to a computer programme, a way of having different experiences. Portals are his way through from this universe to other universes in the infinite multiverse. Science in his belief system is imaginative rather than empirical, using it as a background for the story, employing the narrative feature of "referentiality" where the relation to "truth" is one of "verisimilitude" rather than "verifiability" (Bruner 1991: 13).

As the hero in the story, Peter felt he had a mission; he called it his "assignment". He believed there was a memetic virus in the source code creating this simulation. He described the virus as "memetic" because it downloads a "techno-meme" into the frequencies that manifest the simulation then continually spreads from one mind to another. The source for this term, interestingly, is the scientist and critic of religion Richard Dawkins, who described religion as a virus that spreads from one mind to another and has a specific set of symptoms (1993). For Peter, the virus is a corruption of the source code, located in the galactic centre, which he described as not "out there" but within us. It attacks the frequencies of the simulation, thereby affecting our perception of reality. It prevents humanity from coming together, leaving us weak and divided, while simultaneously creating pollution and resource depletion that will eventually undermine our subsistence. He told me that chemicals and "cell phone radiation" were making us infertile, and personalised technology, such as smartphones, was an effective weapon against us through making us dependent on it and the instant gratification it supplies, while destroying the planet at the same time. This was a "Trojan horse" attack, where what we depend on for modern society to function is also slowly killing us. He said that if there were aliens, they would not attack with a death ray or invasion, they would poison our water supply, pollute our air, destroy our ability to exist on this planet, and make us impotent so we could no longer reproduce and that is what he saw as happening in the world today. The idea of a virus was a metaphor for what he saw as wrong with modern society.

Peter's mission was to fix these problems. This virus was introduced into the simulation with silicone-based technology, and after it has been cleared there would

have to be a moratorium on this kind of technology. It was not only the removal of this technology that was required but also humanity needed to come together, to cooperate rather than compete for survival. What he was suggesting was a death and rebirth of this world, in his discourse the simulation needed to be rebooted. There was an element of eternal recurrence to this idea. He said we had done all this before, he comes into the simulation to open the portal, and by successfully doing that he goes to the next "level", where he enters the source code and removes the virus. The eternal recurrence is similar to a video game, just as one passes levels to advance to the next stage in a video game that is how Peter saw his mission; he had done this before and would do it again, on the next level. He once joked that death is just like re-spawning in a video game. What is perhaps ironic about this belief system is that he uses the language of technology: programmes, simulations, viruses, levels, while advocating the removal of technology (or at least silicone-based technology) from our reality. This mission created the dramatic tension in the story, the plot line that leads up to the climax of the portal opening. It also places Peter within the rich tradition of American apocalypticism and millennialism, predicting an end to this world and the beginning of a new one (Stewart and Harding 1999; Faubion 2001; Lewis 1994; Wright 1995; Chidester 2003; Kaplan 1997; Wessinger 2000; Strozier and Flynn 2000).

The means by which Peter believed he would reach the source code and remove the virus was a portal. Belief in portals was not unique to Peter; I found myself listening to talk of portals frequently in Sedona. Peter believed we went through portals all the time; it was how a different level in the simulation was reached. The portal he wished to open on Bell Rock on the 21st was a powerful one that required him to take people to the top so that their frequencies raised the vibration sufficiently so it would open. The first time he went up Bell Rock in 1998, he was with a galactic astrologer who told him it was an intergalactic portal. I asked him if this was the source of his portal theory and he said yes, but also cited the Harmonic Convergence in 1987, when people gathered in Sedona expecting, among other things, a spaceship to come out of Bell (Ivakhiv 2001: 174). He also mentioned that Bell Rock is in the UFO corridor from Area 51 in Nevada to Tucson in Southern Arizona and considered this significant (see Darlington 1997).

All these sources were considered clues that helped confirm his belief that Bell Rock was where the portal would open.

Like many millenarians, Peter read reality as permeated with clues (Harding 1991: 233; Robbins 1997: 14; Eves 2011: 19; Eaton 1997: 141-142). There are no coincidences, only synchronicities that point to deeper meanings in the simulation, such as 11:11, 2012, and the Mayan calendar. Peter called 11:11 a "gateway", a symbol that he interpreted as a code in the simulation to help him realise what was going on and remember what he was here for . Peter started noticing 11:11 in October 1998, the occurrences increased in frequency leading up to 11th November 1998 when he had his epiphany that reality was a simulation and he had to remove the virus. While I was in Sedona, Peter would consistently point out when he saw 11:11 in different contexts. The most significant occurrence for him was on his 70th birthday when he travelled to the Bahamas with his daughter for a holiday, and went swimming with dolphins. The dolphin bit him on his hand, leaving four vertical bite marks. He interpreted this bite mark as significant because the scars looked like the digits 11:11, and concluded that this mark could function like a barcode, he could hold it up to the portal on the 21st so he could gain entry to the source code. Reading reality as a series of clues is how stories are constructed through "narrative accrual", particularly associating things happening at the same time with each other in a meaningful way rather than dismissing them as coincidence (Bruner 1991: 18-19). For millenarians, the clues create a story that tells how this world will end and a new one will begin.

Clues came to Peter through television programmes and films as well as directly from life events. The motivation behind his most notorious claim, the "leap of faith" came from the episode of the TV show *Lost*, called "316". This was his favourite episode of the show, and in American notation "316" is also his birthday, March 16th. This linked to the event with the dolphin that happened on his birthday. *Lost* is a TV show open for interpretation; as a mystery show that unfolds over six seasons, the episodes are peppered with clues to the riddles the show proposes and fans engage in active detection through repeat viewing (Ames 2012; Lavender-Smith 2012; Mousoutzanis 2012; Himsel Burcon 2012; Bennett 2012). The show ends with the main character getting lowered into the "source" of a mysterious light in order to save the

world. Peter read personal relevance into this fictional narrative; it became an inspiration for what his "mission" was, as were other movies and TV shows with similar plot points. Media provided him with clues through which he constructed his own narrative of individual messianism.

Nothing that occurred in the simulation was neutral for Peter, everything pointed to something else, a hidden meaning or deeper truth. This included my arrival. I met Peter in September 2012, and we first climbed Bell Rock together on the day that was 101 days before the 21st, a number which to him referred to 11:11. Peter said it was no coincidence for a cultural anthropologist to appear in the story with 101 days to go. I was an alien, one of the watchers in the simulation, sent to monitor his progress. It would be the perfect cover; a galactic anthropologist masquerading as a cultural anthropologist. He sometimes called me Elizabeth, which he guessed must be my name in a previous simulation, otherwise why else would it pop into his head when he was addressing me? It seemed obvious to him and it made him think that he was right about something significant happening. This drew my attention to my role as an anthropologist in my informants' lives; in this context I could not be a neutral observer. Just being present in Sedona at this time meant that I had an effect on Peter's beliefs; I was a character in his story. This raises ethical issues, was I changing what was happening in my informant's life? I think that whether I was there or not, Peter would have been on Bell Rock on 21st December, and he would have found significance in whoever was there and whatever happened. Yet the fact remains that I was there, and this did have an impact.

Jenkins argues that in the process of asking informants about their beliefs, social scientists can, often unwittingly, help create and develop these beliefs through the rhetorical process of asking about them (2013: 52-53). Jenkins produces this reflection through re-reading Festinger's classic analysis of an American millenarian group (ibid: 54-66; Festinger et al 1956). Festinger placed researchers as observers posing as believers in the group surrounding Marion Keech, who predicted the end of the world on the 21st December 1954 and that a UFO would save the believers (ibid: 237). When the date came and passed, the observers noted the reactions of the group as they navigated the disappointment of prophecy unfulfilled. Festinger's lasting contribution was the term

"cognitive dissonance", which was described as the gap between two opinions or beliefs that do not fit together; this creates discomfort and then pressure to reduce the dissonance by changing the beliefs, forgetting the importance of the gap, or obtaining new information to allow beliefs to become consonant with each other (ibid: 26). The group around Keech demonstrated a range of these strategies after the prophesied event did not occur.

Jenkins calls Festinger's analysis a "psychological description" and offers instead a "rhetorical approach" that emphasises how interrelated parties deploy models of language to construct certain kinds of account (2013: 66). Instead of accounting for how the group was dealing with 'reality', Jenkins examines how members of the group produced their interpretations through discussion and analysis with each other, including the members who were secretly observing events for Festinger's study. Festinger also allows that in a millenarian situation it was impossible for his observers to remain neutral because "any action had consequences", the observers had to lead meetings, take stands when opinions were divided, and were pressured to quit their jobs (1956: 244). However, Festinger dismisses the influence of the observers, claiming that there was no effect on the continued proselytising of the Keech group (ibid: 246). Jenkins takes this situation as the point of departure for his analysis, arguing instead that the words and actions of the social scientists were a crucial part of the dialectical production of millenarian events, particularly in their questions after the disappointing event they reinforced the idea that that was the reality and it was what the believers should be dealing with (2013: 3-4). Stewart and Harding emphasise that such "coproduction" is a common trend in apocalypticism (1999: 287). Groups working from what Barkun calls a millenarian "script" have their end-time signs confirmed by outsiders' (often hostile) responses to their activities, something to which he attributes the tragic deaths of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas (1994: 44; see also Kaplan 1994: 51-53; Faubion 2001; Wright 1995; Wessinger 2000: 56-103). Jenkins' emphasis on rhetorical production and Barkun's concept of a millenarian "script" resonate with Bruner's narrative construction of reality; in millenarianism, a story is constructed through selected references to events read as signs that create a plot that leads to the climax of the end of the world.

Peter on top of Bell Rock taking pictures of a group he guided up

During the run up to his eschatological event, I was afraid that my presence might convince Peter of the veracity of his beliefs to the point where he would jump. It is important not to overstate my own influence, however, since collaborativeness is part of the nature of ethnography, and not only I but also everyone else present affected his story as well (Crapanzano 2010; Robbins 1997; Clifford and Marcus 1986). Dumit notes how the playful narration of the self in 'new age' locates those involved in it as both insiders and outsiders, they are interested in 'new age' practice but they are not 'new agers' in their estimation, an ambiguously dual position that mirrors that of the anthropologist (2001: 72). I recognise this ambiguous duality in my relationship with Peter, where we both acted as anthropologist and informant in our own stories. We both selected certain events from a plural and messy 'reality' to create coherent narratives; he calls his a story that is part of a simulation, I call mine a thesis that is part of an anthropology degree. He put me into his story as an alien, I put him into my thesis as an informant and representative of spirituality in Sedona, even though he said he was not

spiritual and I said I was not an alien. Structurally we were these things to each other even if we did not describe ourselves in those terms.

The interaction between Peter and me became a way for him to reflect on and even modify his story. I was a sounding-board for his ideas because I was asking about them on a regular basis. It became a reciprocal dialogue through which we both constructed an understanding of what he was doing. He would often directly ask me to interpret what was going on or what things meant. He asked me what I thought of his repeatedly climbing Bell, and I described it as a ritual. From then on he called it a ritual, I asked why and he said because I said so and then soon after that conversation he heard a reference to ritual in a movie, so the synchronicity proved it. It did indeed seem like a ritual to me[9]. There was a habitual structure for each climb. We would meet in the parking lot, then walk down the trail to the base, then we would climb the rock, at a junction between a sheer rock face and a crevice Peter would stop everyone and explain the two different routes, giving each climber the choice as to which they attempted, then half way up we would stop on the same boulder and sit and take a rest. When we got to the top Peter would get all the new members to stand on the plinth to the left of the saddle and pose, including a jump which he would endeavour to catch on his camera when they were in mid-air so it looked like they were levitating. Peter described this as "performance", he said he would bring people to the top and they would just start performing, such as yoga poses, music, juggling, meditations or ceremonies. Peter would make it sound spontaneous when he described it, but before he took people up he would tell them about what previous people had done and create an expectation for others to continue this, sometimes carrying up props such as guitars or cellos. Peter said on the top people would look "euphoric", as if they had been taken over by a different energy form on the top or even that they were paying "tribute" to whatever kind of intelligence was up there. Then we would climb down, at the bottom he would high-five all the new members, congratulating them for having made it, and he would pay for a meal at a local restaurant. In this way, the people he hosted became "guests stars" in

[9] At one point I even tried to describe it to him in terms of Van Gennep's rite of passage, where the ascent was separation from ordinary life, being on the top was liminality, and the descent was reincorporation (1960; Turner 1969).

formulaic episodes with a recognisable narrative arc that he subsequently displayed through images and videos posted online.

The recurring characters in the story were his friends in Sedona, but more significantly, Sedona itself and Bell Rock. Peter described himself as having a relationship with this specific rock, he said that to him Bell was a woman, called "Belle", even though typically in Sedona vortex typology Bell is attributed masculine energy (see chapter two). He described Bell Rock and Sedona as life forms that have their own energy patterns, and he was in some form of contact with them. In doing so, he attributed agency to the rock and the town because he believed these entities to be high energy life forms that in the simulation take the appearance of dense matter. Sedona, as mentioned earlier, was the entity that oversaw his programme in the simulation, granting him new characters for his story and different plot twists. In doing this, he exhibited the expansion of agency to non-human forms mentioned in the introduction. It must be highlighted that agency is an attribute of energy patterns, so the fact that humans have it as well as rocks is a consequence of both of these forms being composed of energy. It also allowed Sedona and Bell to feature as characters in his story, which is part of "intentional state entailment", for entities to act as protagonists they must be endowed with agency (Bruner 1991: 7).

Throughout the morning of the 21st, Peter received calls from club members wishing him well, and he was becoming emotional; it was as if they had come back for cameos in his finale. I suggested he had created an event for them to emotionally attach to and find significant. Peter frowned, "Did I just create all this to experience emotion?" Chad said I was like his therapist, leading him to answer his own questions rather than providing answers myself. The point was perhaps not to answer his questions, which were mostly unanswerable, but to have the dialogue, to think through these issues with him. This is what Peter seemed to want from me, perhaps because he saw me as having more knowledge about the simulation because of my role as a watcher. It was impossible for me to even pretend to be an impartial observer; I was a part of this ethnographic situation, helping to create what was going on as it was happening in a rhetorical dialectic as outlined by Jenkins. The purpose of our dialogue was on a surface level a search for meaning. Peter wanted to know what it all meant, however, if that was

all he wanted there would be innumerable ways to enrich his life with meaning. Instead he chose to produce and live a highly specific and elaborate "belief system" that he called a story and publicised through social media. He shaped his reality through telling a story and brought the people around him, family, friends, acquaintances, total strangers, the town he lived in, and the landscape he inhabited, into this story as well.

Stories are worth telling because they relate a breach in cultural norms according to Bruner. A breach means trouble, and "it is Trouble that provides the engine of drama" (Bruner 1991: 16). Peter's story seems idiosyncratic, but the title of this section is ironic. His story is rooted in American cultural motifs: the individual saviour of the collective, the multiverse with the door to another reality where space and time are different, sacrificing the self to renew the world. It is normative within the genre of millenarian scripts. He wove these varying strands into his own narrative composition to provide him with a story worth telling to others. The declaration of his leap of faith was his breach, his way of creating trouble; what Peter wanted was drama. By setting a date for the end and declaring his faith in his prediction he created a narrative arc resulting in a climax, which was anticlimactic as with all millenarian predictions. However, what stopped him from ultimately taking his leap of faith was his family, especially the protests of his daughter. This is the true breach in his narrative construction of reality; his unfettered American individualism was restrained by his social relationships. He rewrote his millenarian script because of his family's protests, family was more important than individual agency, what he believed was less important than their feelings.

American Nightmare: Living in a (Hyper)Reality Show

Peter's narrativisation of his own life aimed at dramatising and publicising his experience. This allowed for the constant (over)creation of meaning, as he read the flow of events and people around him as significant, indicative of a deeper plot. Peter rendered his story into a structure derived from contemporary American media; that of a reality TV show. Using the metaphor of a "game", he said he was in a competition with

all the other beings in the simulation to be the most outrageous, which would then be the most watched. This would mean he would "win", or get his extraordinary event and be proven right in his beliefs. He called his reality TV show "The Top of Bell Rock Club" and everything he experienced was part of the show. Events were interpreted in episodic format, structured into seasons, with recurring characters and guest stars, narrated by Peter in his speech and on his Facebook page. The extraordinary event was the big finale at the end of the season, the dramatic climax, or possibly a cliffhanger. He described several different versions of what could happen on 21st. One suggestion was that he could go through the portal and then all the club members around the world would disappear, leaving a mystery to be solved in the next season. When nothing happened, it was an anti-climax. He did not "win" as he announced on his Facebook page with the picture of the depressed robot. This led to a short period of depression, until he decided he had garnered enough ratings for renewal. Then he constructed a new season of his reality show, with a new location.

A few weeks after the 21st December, Peter announced the next season of his life-as-reality-show, which he called "The House in Magic Land on Rainbow Lane". He had not "won" in his terms, but he had been successful enough to be renewed for another season. He had been evicted from his apartment facing Bell Rock because of his neighbour's complaints about noise from his visitors and had to leave at the end of December; this in itself he found significant. Once the 21st passed, he had no reason to be there, so it then became impossible for him to stay. His new house was near Red Rock Crossing, a popular swimming hole in Sedona, in view of Cathedral Rock, another vortex. The house was on Rainbow Lane, and at the head of the road there was a sign that said "Magic Land Realty", which was the company that leased the house to Peter and his housemate. He continued to take people to the top of Bell Rock, but without any set purpose as to why. He enjoyed it so he continued doing it, and he continued the same ritual and counting the number of people in the Top of Bell Rock Club. When this ended after two seasons chronicled on his Facebook page, he moved again to a new residence in the Village of Oak Creek, an apartment above a store called the Bike n Bean, which rented and sold bikes and was also a coffee shop. He called this the second season of the Top of Bell Rock Club, which he posted on Facebook under the title "Above the Bike n

Bean". He told me just before I left Arizona in April 2014 that he had a new mission, to take 2,222 people to the top of Bell Rock by the winter solstice of 2018 because in that year the winter solstice is at 22:22 UTC, so he will again try to open a portal.

Or at least, this is what Peter said. At the same time, he was upfront about the fact that nothing he had a revelation of after his first 11:11 experience in 1998 has come to pass yet. If anyone, for instance sceptical couchsurfers hiking Bell Rock with him, confronted him on this, he would say that he believed what he believed because of the experiences he had had, and if he was wrong, then that was no big deal. It was all fiction that someone made up; that was life. He was simply making up a more interesting story for himself than just being an old man who sits by the creek and does paint by numbers, as he sardonically suggested he might do if nothing happened on December 21st. After December 21st, he said he felt empty without his story, so after a short time, he made up a new one. In his own terms, he yelled "plot twist!" and carried on. This was his answer to cognitive dissonance; there was no gap between 'reality' and his beliefs because his beliefs created his reality. He did not claim that it was given to him by a divine source; his beliefs were just what made sense for his story. Since everyone was in their own story, they should make their own decisions and take responsibility for them. This radical individualism is why he never tried to accrue followers.

While Peter did not seek followers, it is clear from what happened on December 21st that a number of people were inspired by the same sources as he was, such as 11:11 recurring in their lives, or by his actions. Peter defined everything he did as the outcome of his individual choices but his story still resonated with others. Jenkins suggests that millenarianism is about the present rather than the future, mapping an experience of uncertainty when "accepted categories" are disrupted (2013: 15). Cohn argues that millenarianism follows social dislocation and anxiety; his theory derives from a historical analysis of the suffering poor during 11th-14th centuries in Western Europe who found consolation from oppression in prophecy (1957: 14-15). Messiahs offered hope; millenarianism "came to serve as vehicles for social aspirations and animosities" (ibid: 15). Peter's story operated in a similar way to how Cohn describes prophecy. Neoliberal policies and global transformations undermine previously accepted social expectations and create new economic insecurities. The feeling of being in a simulation

reflects a social experience of powerlessness felt in global capitalism (Žižek 2010: ix-xiii). Peter told me that the reason why he tried to get attention and publicity, why all people in American society do, is because on some level they know that they are in a simulation. This existential anxiety leads to acting out, attention-seeking behaviour in order to overcome it. They feel more of a sense of realness when others pay attention to them. This is something that Baudrillard has suggested, that the "uncertainty of existing, and consequently the obsession of proving our existence" matters above all else (2012: 31). Peter's millenarian script of living in a simulated reality created a sense of realness and purpose in a social situation of powerlessness and anonymity.

In *Simulations*, Baudrillard suggests that we live in an era of simulation, where the "reality principle" has been subverted by third-order simulacra, where signs no longer refer to anything but themselves (1983: 152). This is a situation of hyperreality created by media, the representation of reality to such an extent that reality is no longer represented, and only the simulation exists. It is a self-referential circularity that echoes Peter's search for experience; he creates what he is looking for in the process of searching for it. Baudrillard speaks to a broader, cultural level. He gives the example of Disneyland as an "idealised transposition of a contradictory reality" that is the American way of life (ibid: 24). With its themed rides simulating the experience of pirates, spacemen, and frontiers, Disneyland is a playground of illusions constructed to simulate reality. The act of creating a replica for the purpose of play supplants the reality it is purported to replicate, it "conceals the fact that it is ... "real" America which is Disneyland" (ibid: 25) Peter lives in this cultural Disneyland, not only on the macro-level of "America" that Baudrillard evokes, but on the local level. Sedona can be seen this way too, it was described to me as a "fantasyland" by some of my informants, where people come to play their ideal reality as a shaman or psychic or fire dancer (see chapter four). It is not surprising that living in this cultural context, Peter developed his narrative of saving the world by reprogramming a simulation.

Peter chose to publicise his story through social media, a forum which approximates hyperreality even more closely than TV or Disneyland; it is an endless display of images selected to represent a person's life that for some become more real than life itself. It seemed to me for Peter the images he took and posted were in some

ways more important than the action of being on the rock itself. The representation of the act was more important than the act itself because that is how he intended to alter the simulation, through changing its programming, rewriting its script. The simulation is part of Peter's narrative construction of reality; it is the landscape in which his story unfolds. In Bruner's terms it is a "reality" created or constituted by narrative not concretely "represented" by it, it is a literary convention as much as James Joyce's "Dublin" (1991: 13). But on another level the simulation does refer to the material conditions of Peter's life in the same way Joyce's Dublin refers to a specific place with a material existence. It is not pure hyperreality; there is a breach in norms being explored by Peter's story, a disruption to accepted categories being mapped.

Peter positions himself as the prophet perceptive enough to realise the simulation and destined to break it down and remake it in his ideal image of a perfected reality. This is the messianic role adopted by Marian Keech and other millenarian leaders; the individual who will save the Elect and then go on to remake society according to their ideals. However, Peter rejected the role of hero. He consistently shrugged off followers and demurred to my suggestion that he is the hero in the story. He is better understood as the protagonist of his story than the hero. His story is not some dull tale either; it is a melodrama with strong emotional and moral overtones. It is his way to experience, understand, and reinterpret his emotions and also a way of reinventing the flat, bland, and dull daily life available to the elderly in American society (Clark and Anderson 1967; Lamb 2014; Leibing and Cohen 2006; Gardner 1997). He rejected the role of the marginal old man; he was not going to the creek to paint by numbers. He invented his story as something other people wanted to engage with and pay attention to. This was the breach in cultural norms his story explored; a renegotiation of what an elderly man 'should' be doing with his time.

The problem with the analysis of Peter's story as a narrative construction of reality is that when life is seen only as representation then it is ephemeral, it has no grounding in the material conditions in which the story unfolds. Indeed, as previously mentioned, I think one of the reasons Peter constructed his story was to ignore parts of his social reality. However, Peter's story also contained a critique of current social conditions. Most obviously in his rejection of technology as a virus; but he also, if

questioned, disagreed with the prevailing political economic ideology of America. Some couchsurfers that visited him in summer 2014 were travelling the country interviewing people about what they thought of the American dream. They interviewed Peter. He told them the American dream is the "American nightmare"; a scam, a con, a lie to make us work in a capitalist system that profits someone else, who stores the money but does not reinvest it. They are making us work through the lie that material success will make us happy when it does not. There is no point working hard, take it easy, be happy, find peace; people who work hard are best experienced vicariously, so you can see what rewards they reap, without having to go through all that effort yourself. His view of capitalism speaks to the sense of anxiety and hopelessness which Cohn considered the root of millenarianism historically. His belief in the simulation and his mission within it provides him with purpose and hope.

In writing his own life as a story Peter is following the central tenet of

Peter sitting on the top of Bell Rock. Visible on his inner arm are his tattoos, which signify 'faith' in the Hebrew and Japanese alphabets. Peter suggested they might work as barcodes at the portal allowing him access to the source code.

spirituality to create your own reality. Significantly given his age, Peter is creating his own ending, going out with a bang not drifting away forgotten in an old people's home. There are always limits on the ability to determine the terms of one's own existence; the most significant, for Peter, was his family, but there were also competing narratives in the media and around Sedona interpreting what he did differently to how he did. Narrativised social reality is still embedded social reality, and a successful narrative reflects and even critiques the wider context. Peter's creation of a story and casting of himself as the protagonist in a tale serialised through social media is a rejection of the treatment of the elderly as marginal in American society. He places himself in the centre of his story; not serving others or participating in his family life. It is also a rejection of the ideology of the American dream; he gave up his successful career and its material benefits and chose to be happy and at peace instead. He valued the spiritual over the material.

Why do this? If reality is narrative, and he is the writer, he has control. The simulation idea, which I related to the landscape of the story, conveys this sense of control; if reality is a simulation of his choosing, he decided on everything that happens to him. He is responsible and he is in control. How does the individual relate to society? The individual saves society. But in turn he saves himself from the ending he did not want; dying alone forgotten in a nursing home. This tension between his individual need for attention and other people's reinterpretation of his beliefs and actions permeated Peter's story. He consistently tried to act as what Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandolla called *homo faber*, the man who makes himself, where the creation of one's own reality is the creation of the self (Sennett 2008: 72, 2003: 28). Peter was creating himself, creating his life, through constructing his reality as a story.

Red Rocks, Vortexes, and Holy Mountains: the Production of Nature as Sacred Space

"It has come quickly, this crushing, industrial love of paradise. The pervert-free, less-trammeled, hundred-mile-view days were little more than two decades past, not so very long ago. Yet already my own history sounds like another country." - Ellen Meloy, *The Anthropology of Turquoise*, 2002, p. 74

Phoenix is the main entrypoint to Arizona for many travellers arriving through one of Sky Harbor's four terminals; they encounter the span of a sprawling desert city rising from the dust on the backs of air conditioning, water piped hundreds of miles from the north, and petroleum-fired transportation (Sheridan 2012: 1-8; Ivakhiv 2001: 161). The grids of ochre dirt and artificial green form neighbourhoods that form suburbs that form the swelling metropolis that eyes the encircling plains rapaciously. Heading north on I-17 climbs steadily through from the low Sonoran desert of saguaros and creosote to the high desert of prickly pear cactus and sagebrush through undeveloped exits with inauspicious names such as Bloody Basin and Horsethief Basin that memorialise Arizona's cattle ranching past. Exit 179 leads through rolling hills to reveal the stunning red crags rivuleting the earth around the base of the Mogollon Rim; green trees swooping up over succulents grandly announcing the presence of fresh water; the town of Sedona settled smugly in the sandstone canyons; a modern day tourist playground of turquoise and adobe gated communities, timeshares, hotels, and spas. On the outskirts, at the base of hills, wherever the view is poorest, sit little manufactured houses and double-wide trailers, the lower income homes that resemble the surrounding communities of Cottonwood, Cornville, and Jerome more closely than the high-value architectural gems that gird and mount the mesas and buttes of Sedona.

Running up through Oak Creek Canyon, following the path of the creek, the ponderosa pine grow thickly, the human settlement thins to a few motels, campgrounds, and high-end restaurants and homes nestled at the ascending elevations. The narrow switchbacks choke with traffic every sunny weekend as visitors from every direction descend on the riparian coolness of Oak Creek Canyon, bathing in the natural swimming

holes, bringing a cooler with the kids to sit on the banks and drink beer under the shade of the pines, a luxury absent in more southerly settlements. The canyons back onto the Mogollon Rim, the bottom edge of the Colorado Plateau, the tail end of the Rocky Mountains. Between the Rim and the base of the volcanic mountain ridge known in English as the San Francisco Peaks, named by Franciscan missionaries after their patron saint, squats the city of Flagstaff, the largest urban area in Northern Arizona, home to a university, an observatory, and a ski resort. The railway skirts the south side of Flagstaff; the Santa Fe Railroad follows the 39th parallel all the way to the Pacific and brought this settlement and the neighbouring cities of Winslow, Holbrook, Williams, and Ash Fork into being. Parallel to the railroad runs its obsolescence; Route 66, the Mother Road of America's mythic itinerant past, now called the I-40, although meandering dirt remnants of the old 66 still putter through the landscape alongside the newer road. North yawns the Grand Canyon, a four-hundred mile gap in the earth; to the east, the Painted Desert and Petrified Forest; between them the expanse of the Navajo Nation, the largest Native American reservation in the continental United States.

This particular corner of Arizona has a number of spaces called sacred by different peoples at different times for different reasons. An examination of these spaces offers a view of the processes through which space is made sacred. Sedona was considered a sacred site by everyone I spoke to; even people who were not interested in spirituality would mention that it was sacred to the Native Americans or that its beauty was a sign of God's presence. Among those who followed a spiritual path, the vortexes were the most frequently cited reason for why Sedona is considered sacred[10]. Sedona is an example of the social production of the sacred in recent historical memory, a recorded and visible process of sacralisation. This process operates through the concepts of vortexes, energy, and nature, all of which are given specificity in this particular cultural context through the lens of spirituality.

The vortexes are swirling energy spirals constituting certain rock formations and other locations in Sedona imbuing these physical entities with agency. It is a tactile experience to my informants; it can be felt. Since mass is an illusion created by energy

[10] The term 'vortex' was nearly always pluralised as 'vortexes' not 'vortices', so I follow the native usage of the term here.

vibrating at certain frequencies in the cosmology of spirituality, the presence of beautiful, even sublime features in the landscape evidences the high vibration of energy in that area. The beauty of nature is a physical substantiation of the special energy. Vortexes, energy, and nature are interconnected and interdependent concepts in processes of sacralisation in this context. The influences of transcendentalism and the deeper nature religion in America are evident (Albanese 1990, 2002). This chapter interrogates the spatial connection between 'the sacred' and 'nature' in the social construction of American landscape, in which sacred space is closely identified with nature (Gatta 2004; Cronon 1996). It analyses the capitalist material production of 'nature' as a separate, preserved space that is not altered by humans that determines the priorities and regulations of land use (Darling 2005). It enquires into the uneven distribution of resources for the production of nature in capitalism (Escobar 1999).

Sedona is rich in "natural amenities" such as forest, freshwater, canyons and mountains (Ferguson and Tamburello 2015). This attracts tourists; the spiritual scene also acts as a tourist pull through the crystal stores in Uptown and vortex tours (Ivakhiv 1997). The beautiful landscape, talk of vortexes, and presence of other spiritual seekers are mutually reinforcing in creating the understanding of Sedona as a sacred space composed of special energy. My informants often began their spiritual path by visiting Sedona as a tourist; they were struck by the feeling of the place, its energy. Then they moved to Sedona to live in the sacred, describing a mystical "call" from the energy of the land itself. Nature wants them there, but they find continual frustration from the human social environment: too much traffic, onerous local ordinances, and overcrowding at well-known sites; other people spoil nature.

The kind of nature they want has the humans removed; a historical process of emptying the land of its previous or current human occupants (Sheridan 2006: 15-16). It has been demarcated as an area for escape from others; an area where humans do not live only visit, an imaginary space where something called 'the environment' is separate from and needs to be protected from the impacts of the living creatures it encompasses. The government regulates spaces according to this utopian ideal through the National Park, National Forest, and National Monument system of land designations (Grusin 2004). Conservation aims to fix this point into the landscape (Darling 2001). To create

separate spaces for the sacred in the United States, this required the removal of people, both literally and figuratively, in a process of structural violence. The term structural violence brings awareness to the negative effects of social structures that systematically harm and disadvantage individuals (Farmer 1996, 2004; Graeber 2011: 112-113, 2015b: 57; Hickel 2015; Sheridan 2006). In ideating nature as sacred through the concept of energy, spirituality forms part of these inequitable social structures.

Vortexes Everywhere

The vortexes are specific natural sites in Sedona that are different on an energetic level according to my informants. The energy of these sites is characterised as having a spiral pattern, described in the literature by local Sedona authors variously as spiritual or psychic or "subtle", and it is said to enhance spiritual practices, such as meditation, healing, and channelling (Sutphen 1986; Andres 2000; Dannelley 1995; Ayres 1997). Energy is used as a way of describing a sensorial relationship with certain geological formations (Ivakhiv 2001: 24-25). It is figured as flowing in lines, called ley-lines, that criss-cross the earth in a grid; the intersections of this grid form vortexes. These points are concentrations of energy, sometimes called "power spots" or likened to the chakras of the earth[11]. The energy of the vortexes is further categorised as being as masculine or feminine, electromagnetic or electric, yin or yang (Sutphen 1986: 82). These qualities are experienced, felt, rather than measured or seen, as a tingling sensation, a heightened emotional sensitivity, or a rush of new ideas and insights (Andres 2000: 23). Vortexes make spirituality tangible. They offer a sacralisation of nature in Sedona as they are inextricably linked to the landscape; it is a sacrality that emanates from the earth itself.

[11] Interestingly, in online depictions Sedona is not included as one of the earth chakras. Nearby Mt Shasta in California is the root chakra. Glastonbury as the heart chakra is also included in Prince and Riches 2000: 59. The energy in Sedona is nearly always described as positive, and Sutphen calls the vortexes there "positive vortexes", but there are also "negative vortexes", the most famous of which is the Bermuda triangle, 1986: 82-84. Ivakhiv mentions two "negative vortexes" in Sedona, at Indian Gardens and the Sedona Post Office site, 2011: 185. I did not hear these locations talked about as negative vortexes during my fieldwork.

There are four Sedona sites in particular named as vortexes: Cathedral Rock, Bell Rock, Airport Mesa, and Boynton Canyon. This was apparently engineered to service the needs of tourists, many of whom want to know specifically where the vortex is, in terms of a place on a map, a specific stop on their itinerary of Sedona (Andres 2000: 17). Locals more often told me that the whole area was a vortex or that there were innumerable vortexes of varying sizes to be found around the town. The special energy spreads over whole area with the vortexes as different access points to it. In the first place I stayed in - which was styled as "the Cosmic Portal" - I was told that there was a vortex under the garage floor. Even though this was part of the built environment, it still contained a vortex which came from the Earth beneath the house and not the garage floor itself. Still, the manner of discernment was the same, my host at the Cosmic Portal, Vixen du Lac, asked if I could "feel" it. She told me that vortexes were everywhere not

Boynton Canyon. The whole canyon is considered a vortex but this rocky outcrop in particular was identified as a specific locus of special energy

just in Sedona and showed me pictures of the orbs that gathered around vortex sites[12]. She told me the special energy of vortexes has a way of making things happen how you need them to, which is often not how you wanted them to happen. How you want things to happen is a product of your ego, whereas manifestation creates what you truly need, and the vortex enhances the power of manifestation. Above all, vortexes are felt. A pressure on the third eye maybe, the spot between the brow ridges, but everyone feels the energy differently. The idea of the sacred was based on feeling; my informants felt that Sedona was special; 'vortex' and 'energy' were just attempts to translate that into words. It was the emotional experience that validated it as a real thing. Feelings had their own ontological validity. If something was felt; it was real. There was no dismissal of 'just a feeling'; a feeling was as real as something empirically perceived. This follows the primacy of intuition, heart wisdom, over logic, outlined in the introduction.

The spaces that engender these feelings had their own histories, however. Philip, a videographer, told me that the original site of the Airport Mesa vortex was said to be on the flat top of the mesa, where the airport is located. This caused considerable disruption to the functioning of the small, private airport when people would walk along the runway with maps looking for the vortex. So the owners of the airport 'moved' it; they got all the local vortex maps changed to say that the vortex is a rock outcrop about halfway up the road that leads to the airport. That is where the vortex is now located, and people go up there and say that they feel the special energy. This suggests that only once a site is named as sacred then it is felt as such. Naming in this context is a magical act of transformation where the name 'vortex' grants power in the cosmology of spirituality through its linkage with the concept of energy (Gell 1998: 102; Grusin 2004: 112-113). Energy is not only a description of the sensorial relationship with the landscape but a creative concept that allows individuals to colour their experience there in a certain way. This particular story also implies that any aspect of landscape could be constructed as sacred. It was told for a specific reason; to undercut the accepted reality

[12] Orbs are the blurry coloured circles of light that sometimes show up in photos caused by lens flare or dust on the lens. In spirituality, these photographic bloopers are interpreted as inter-dimensional beings, sometimes also called elementals or fairies or aliens, that show up on photographs when they want to. Some people told me they were very good at getting photographs of orbs, speculating that the orbs must be attracted to their good energy. On the spiritual interpretation of photographic "blobs" see Apolito 2005.

Cathedral Rock, taken from the perspective of Red Rock Crossing.

of the vortexes in Sedona, to make clear that the speaker was not taken in by this label as so many others in the town were.

This is not to suggest that Philip thought the notion of Sedona's special energy was invented rather that the idea of there being four specific vortexes in Sedona was

seen by people in the spiritual community as an introductory idea for those new to spirituality, especially tourists. It is simpler to direct a new arrival looking for a vortex to a specific location, such as Cathedral Rock, which is also the most photographed spot in Arizona according to Forest Service data (Ivakhiv 1997: 377). It is an easier climb than Bell Rock, a gentle incline with only a few spots of scrabbling over boulders that most visitors can achieve. It is the image of Sedona that is disseminated in tourist brochures and websites attracting the 3-4 million tourists that visit each year. Unlike the other three of the 'big four', the vortex has a specific locus, a dome of volanic rock near the central spire, that can be climbed onto, rather than the vortex being the whole rock. It is a visible, impressive, iconic rock formation which can easily supply the answer to the question 'what is a vortex?'

It is perhaps this iconicity that made it the frequent site of ceremonies and spiritual practice that I observed while in the field. Often on hikes up there, I would see people meditating or doing yoga on the volcanic dome, occasionally I spotted scattered human ashes. A monthly drum circle was held there, and I attended a number of ceremonies there for solstices and other astrological or significant dates. When I asked about the name my informants likened the two tall columns of rock flanking a spindle to a cathedral. One of the local legends I was told was that it was originally called Court Rock by 19th century settlers, and Courthouse Butte which is beside Bell Rock was called Church Rock, the names were then confused later on and Court Rock became Cathedral Rock (Johnson 2008: 5). This story was deployed by those who wanted me to know that they understood that the vortexes, and by extension the sacredness of Sedona, was a recent human invention. Analytically, the name is a way of associating it with the sacral quality which it gradually acquired through historically contingent processes of social construction.

The notion that Sedona is a maelstrom of invisible yet potent spiritual energy is also relatively recent and can be traced in historical accounts to the second half of the 20th century. However, in accounts by local authors who are invested in spirituality, the vortexes are credited with a much older heritage. The vortexes were known to the Native Americans, who held the whole area sacred, and were known about by psychics and mediums living in Sedona who did not publicise them (Ayres 1997: 4-5). Ayres

goes on to describe the emergence of 'new age' activities in Sedona through the support of a realtor called Mary Lou Keller who had a building on Hillside in the 1960s where she let people hold spiritual activities for free. In Keller's own account, the vortexes were known to the Native Americans and then Ruby Focus, a group now called Rainbow Ray Focus that is still present in Sedona, came with channelled information about the vortexes and bought property adjacent to the Airport Mesa vortex through Keller in 1963 (Keller 1991: xvi). She says this is the origin despite other claims. The usual attribution in vortex guidebooks is to Dick Sutphen and Page Bryant, a pair of psychics who claimed to feel the vortexes in 1980s (Andres 2000: 14; Sutphen 1986: 21). Sutphen has made a career out of psychic workshops held on Sedona's vortexes aimed at developing psychic abilities, and publishing books about the vortexes and their powers. According to Ayres, Sutphen and Bryant only "publicized" the vortexes, along with Pete Sanders, another well-known Sedona psychic (1997: 7).

There are two narratives here: one historical that traces the vortexes through a sequence of local psychics who chose to talk about and publicise the vortexes in Sedona from the 1960s; the other is mythological, claiming that the vortexes are a real and natural part of the landscape, their continuing existence goes beyond recorded white American history to the Native Americans. This can be seen as a claim intended to give the spiritual energy of Sedona authenticity and legitimate it through reference to the indigenous peoples of the area (Hammer 2004: 134-138). After all, if the energy of Sedona is real, it stands to reason that others before the settling of Sedona by white Americans were aware of it, particularly a people reputed to be more spiritual than white Americans. In Sedona among people involved in spirituality, there was not a lot of interest in how the idea of the vortexes historically developed. There was more of an assumption that they were always there, a natural feature of the landscape, and people started to feel them as part of the shift in consciousness that has been occurring in recent decades.

There was more interest in how the vortexes came to be among long-term non-spiritual residents of the area. Mike was a carpenter who was born and raised in the area. He told me that he knew the guy that invented the vortexes, a man he described as "some burnt-out hippie in a rainbow bus, name of Glen or Greg or something". He

decided there were spots of powerful energy. Mike conceded that they were all areas with great views and exposure; to him that was why they felt powerful. But this guy put a sign on the side of his bus that said "vortex tours" and he would take people round them. Soon after that tour buses started parking in Uptown. This story is probably apocryphal; I heard several different but similar versions of how the vortexes gained renown. Mike's version highlights the social processes at the root of the vortexes. A man came, he felt certain sites were powerful, sites that were already much visited and emotionally affecting, and he named them, reified them, made them a thing, and then that thing could be described to others so they could find meaning in it too, and on another level, that thing could be packaged and then sold to others. The last point Mike made about tour buses in Uptown links to the growing acceptance of the vortexes on a corporate level. Not just businesses, but the City Council of Sedona also found the idea of vortexes useful. Initially the town, which has an ageing population of retirees who are mostly wealthy, and its City Council, were hostile to these incomers, suspicious of the unkempt hippies. But then by the late 1980s, the town had come to accept them and started selling vortex maps and tours (Ivakhiv 2001: 173). The Chamber of Commerce provides information about the vortexes and the spiritual businesses and retreats visitors can patronise on their trip to Sedona. The vortexes became another way to entice tourists to the area. Sedona as a sacred site became part of its 'selling point' (Ivakhiv 1997).

This is not meant as a dismissal of the vortexes as artifices cynically invented for the pursuit of profit. The experience of the vortexes could have life-changing effects. Amelia told the story of how in 2008, during the economic downturn, she lost everything, her home in San Francisco, her business as a decorator and interior designer, her corporate lifestyle, all her furniture. She lived in her car for 13 months. She described this as a positive event because even though she had everything in terms of material success, she was not happy; when she lost everything she found she was finally happy and grateful. Sometime after this experience she found herself receiving numerous signs about Sedona and the Grand Canyon, noticing references to them in the world around her, and then she was at a dinner and a friend of a friend said she wanted to go to the Grand Canyon, but needed someone to go with her. Amelia took this as a

sign that she was meant to visit Arizona at this time, and accompanied her, going off on a solo trip to Sedona.

Amelia visited Cathedral Rock, went off trail, following the butterflies because she had always had "a lifelong thing" with butterflies. She was not sure about what vortexes were, so claims she was not expecting anything, but then she had a "vortex experience": "I stopped in my tracks and I just started crying with sheer joy, my physical body was still here in Sedona, but my spirit body was just so connected to the universe, it was pretty incredible. I was very aware of the divine being with me, very aware of just the omniscience of it all, it was pretty powerful." This experience had a profound effect on her, and she decided that after pursuing her dream of living in France, she would move to Sedona, which she did in early 2012.

The experience at the vortex helped her intuit her personal spiritual path, which was to go to France, and then to Sedona. The beginning of this spiritual path starts with a rupture, she lost her material things, and from that point she turns towards spirituality as a means of being happy, rather than pursuing her career as a means of being wealthy. This turn from the material to the spiritual, from the American dream of consumerist success to the spiritual path of personal wellbeing and happiness, is one that recurs in the narratives of the people I knew in Sedona, and it is this turn which I think is fundamental to understanding the importance of spirituality in contemporary American culture. However, in Amelia's narrative the importance of this life-changing event is downplayed, as she says that it was only the "impetus" to change. Her interest in spirituality was a "lifelong situation" and she tells the story of how she had a premonition of a friend's death in her twenties and how even at a couple of months old she would dream of things that were messages for her in her forties. She called herself an intuitive and psychic, and claimed to be sensitive to energy her whole life. It was only when she lost everything that she began to follow her true path of developing these gifts. Losing everything was the "trigger". She emphasised the continuity of her interest in spirituality, for which the vortex experience was a realisation and not causation.

The vortex experience can be seen as another trigger, or signpost, along her spiritual path. Even though she had never heard of them and ostensibly expected nothing; it was the experience she had there that validated the idea that there was

something special about those areas. While she maintained that every place is special, there was a special energy in Sedona that was very powerful: "I could feel the energy of Sedona a half hour outside, it was very powerful … I've only left once and I felt quite ill, I thought I was car sick, but I was car sick for five days and I wasn't in the car for five days and as soon as I came back I felt fine again, so there is a lot of powerful energy here, yes, it's centralised, here and in other locations around the world." Of all the other power spots in the world, Amelia told me she was drawn to this particular power spot because it was a reflection of her in that moment. The spiritual path was an exploration of the self and so the places she went to were reflections of who she was in that moment.

When I met her, Amelia was in her forties and had been living in Sedona since February 2012. A thin, blonde woman, extroverted and charismatic to the point of controlling, but warm and amiable; her fresh unblemished face made her seem younger than forty, except her eyes, which were drawn and lined. She made her living from selling Native American jewellery at Los Abrigados and other resorts in Sedona. She also considered herself a teacher, reiki master, shamanistic practitioner, writer, and energy worker. She held private and group classes; while I was in Sedona I attended some of her biweekly energy healing sessions and monthly shamanistic journeying sessions. For both she solicited a $10 donation. It was difficult for her to maintain herself financially in Sedona, she struggled to pay rent, and her patchwork of employment did not provide economic stability. She would place her business card on the table with crystals at the start of shamanic journeying sessions and energy healing sessions; the association of the card, the crystals, and the activity in the sessions was meant to raise her vibration in order to enhance her abundance. Despite her continued economic troubles, she described living in Sedona in overwhelmingly positive terms. She framed her migration there as being "called" rather than being forced to move due to the loss of her business. This framing implied she was meant to be there, she was not an immigrant, she was not imposing or appropriating, although she made her living selling Native American jewellery and called herself a shaman. This was her spiritual path and as such it was "meant to be", in her terms, it was a reflection of who she was at that moment; her circumstances therefore could not be any other way.

The vortex experience played a pivotal role in the way Amelia described her spiritual path. The content of this experience was a feeling that she interpreted as connecting her to a larger pattern in the universe, a network of energy to which the vortex gave access. On another level, the idea of vortexes can be seen as an entryway for the practice of spirituality, they operate as a way of initiation, of coming into the cosmology of energy, the universe, and the spiritual path. They rarely played a larger role than this, except as a setting for ceremonies, a space in which spiritual practices took place. The vortexes are a socially produced sacred space; however, the experience of the vortexes is as a 'natural' part of the landscape, an immanent invisible force of the earth and its particular energy. This energy was not restricted to the vortexes but characterised the area as a whole; the reality of this energy was further legitimised through reference to Native Americans. The Native Americans were used as an image of spiritual authenticity, a use reflected in Amelia's employment. Despite her many claimed spiritual vocations, the one that she subsisted on was the resale of Native American jewellery, using their cultural products to support herself just as she used their religious practices to buttress her spiritual path (Kehoe 2003; Aldred 2000; Deloria 1998).

Amelia's journey from successful and affluent San Franciscan decorator to Sedona shaman reflects the declining economic fortunes of the middle class in early 21st century America when the meritocratic prosperity of the American dream is increasingly hard to achieve. Amelia can be seen as an example of downward social mobility, something that is often deemed as a personal failure by Americans particularly when it involves loss of prestige and money (Ortner 2003: 201). Amelia reframed this as a positive experience in spiritual terms through her ability to reconnect with nature once she lost all her material possessions and social status. What is interesting about this when thinking about the influence of the transcendentalist glorification of nature on spirituality is that transcendentalism occurred during a time when the middle class was emerging as a distinct social class (Myerson 2000: xxxi). Spirituality is emerging during a time when the middle class is being squeezed by neoliberal policies undermining economic security (Ortner 2013: 194). Nature seems to be prominent in American religion when the middle class is in transition. There is a need to retreat to nature, to that

separate, sacred space, when economic relations in capitalism are unstable and in transition. In this context, spirituality mystifies downward social mobility and reduced access to resources. It is a way of inverting a negative to a positive experience, and justifying social structural change through claiming that everything happens for a reason and that reason is for the best possible good. The construction of nature as sacred in spirituality reinforces the theme of providence through mystifying causation as the result of 'natural' earth energies calling people to their spiritual path rather than losing or failing in an economic sense.

Special Places, Sacred Sites, Native Peoples

Sedona is not a place to come to get a job or make a lot of money; there are few jobs available, even fewer that offer incomes that make it possible to pay the high rents charged (Ivakhiv 2001: 160-161). The economy is mostly tourism and real estate. Many of the homeowners are wealthy people with second homes or retirees; people involved in spirituality are more likely to rent. Most of the young people I met did not stay in Sedona for more than a few months; those that did tended to work in Sedona but live in the cheaper adjacent communities. Many of the older people I met involved in spirituality were hippies in the 1960s-1970s who stayed and got absorbed by the tourist industry so they could afford to live there. It was common for my informants to respond to the question of why they came to Sedona by saying that they were "called" there, as Amelia did.

In narratives like Amelia's, Sedona has agency. In Gell's theory, agency "causes events to happen", and it can be a property of objects as well as humans (1998: 16). Agents have positions in networks of social relationships and it is this positionality that gives them a role in causation, a role that is attributed by humans because agency is relational (ibid: 22). Sedona's agency is attributed by those who figure it as a sacred place inhabited by special energy, as Peter did in the first chapter. The place is a personification of the special energy of the earth and it reaches out and pulls people from their mundane existences into the spiritual path, thereby exerting agency at a

pivotal moment in the turn to spirituality. Sedona causes individuals to follow their spiritual paths.

However, Sedona rejects as often as it attracts. A sentiment I heard often was summed up by Alice, who worked in a crystal store: "Sedona calls you and then when she's finished with you she spits you out". Alice was "called" from Wisconsin and a miserable job as a juvenile corrections officer, after visiting Sedona on vacation repeatedly during a period of ten years. She was referring to what Ivakhiv calls "red rock fever", when the intensity of the energy amplifies to the extent that it overwhelms and expels people from Sedona (2001: 188). I witnessed numerous people get "spit out" during my fieldwork. It was nearly always ascribed to the energy leading them away from Sedona to a different location and never to the economic difficulties that trying to live in Sedona involved. The agency of Sedona was part of the sacralisation process that mystified the political economic conditions of the town.

People move to Sedona for the nature not the economy; they want to live in beautiful surroundings. Lifestyle migration, where movement is provoked by the desire for better quality of life, is common (Hoey 2010; Korpela 2009; Benson and O'Reilly 2009; Benson 2010, 2011; Osbaldiston 2012). Many such people are retirees, attracted by the year-round warm weather, a pattern repeated throughout the state of Arizona where many communities are purpose built for retirees with a lower age limit of 55 for occupation (Sheridan 2006: 13). I met one such retiree in Sedona, Vivienne, who lived in Uptown next door to my friend Teresa. She lived alone in a large one-floor home that sat at the middle of a hill, the bottom of which still had lower income dwellings, and the top of which was reportedly home to Sharon Stone and Beatrice Welles, Orson Welles' daughter. This sort of spatial social stratification is common in Sedona. The other main hill, Airport Mesa, has million dollar homes on the highest street (named "Panorama") with the best views; the homes toward the bottom of the hill are more likely to be manufactured houses with lower income occupants. The beauty of the place is its selling point, so the priciest homes are the ones with the best views.

Vivienne was 80 when I spoke to her; she had lived in Sedona for 24 years since 1988. Her husband, dead for a year, had worked his whole life for the Ford Motor Company, a job that had taken them to Argentina and Mexico and lastly, Kingman, a

city in Northern Arizona around 100 miles west of Flagstaff along the I-40. From that experience, they knew they wanted to retire in Arizona, and they chose Sedona for its landscape. They both loved to hike, so they came to Sedona for a peaceful retirement in a beautiful place, a typical case of lifestyle migration. Nature was an object for them to come and enjoy; they pursued recreation there not spirituality.

Vivienne was a Methodist and considered the vortexes a "fantasy", made up by "some woman years back" to attract tourists. It had no impact on her life or her decision to move there. Instead, Vivienne believed in a different fantasy: the American dream. She saw the recent history of America as one of teleological progress, things were getting better, people no longer suffered from the infectious diseases that had killed so many during her childhood in Alabama, infrastructure had improved greatly, and America despite its problems was still the greatest country on earth. This was the image of America largely criticised and rejected by those involved in spirituality. Vivienne was from a different time; she never had to work and her husband had remained employed his whole life by the same American car company. There was still a Ford parked in the driveway when I visited. This was not the economic experience of someone like Amelia. Vivienne could afford to live where she wanted because she benefitted from the prosperity of post-war America; she still believed that prosperity was earned and deserved. She represents not only the retirement population of Sedona, but the ageing upper middle class in America who have an economic privilege that is being rapidly eroded. She could afford to enjoy the specialness of Sedona.

One way residents expressed this specialness was calling Sedona a bubble, an island within a very different kind of area. It was seen as spiritually and socially progressive, yet surrounded by socially conservative, Republican-voting, 'redneck' towns. The energy of Sedona is part of this bubble, as mentioned above by Amelia, people would complain of feeling sick if leaving for a time. Conversely the energy of being there could cause sickness, I was told, and this was a sign that it was time to leave. Part of the mythology of Sedona is that when it is time, in terms of the spiritual path, to leave, Sedona conspires to make it difficult to stay. This is the getting "spit out" part of the above quote. The same energy that can draw people in and make things easy for them to stay, can also turn against them. In practical terms what this meant was that

people suddenly found that they could not find a job or place to stay, they lost their money, or their friends turned against them. My house-mate ran an eco-friendly cleaning company and dealt with the rooms and homes of many people who were leaving. He said many left in a hurry; they felt they just had to get out. One woman even said that the red rocks were "screaming" at her to leave. "Sedona" is a spiritual entity with a specific energy, it has agency, in that it is a natural form imputed with intentionality and causation (Gell 1998: 17). Sedona causes things to happen on the spiritual path; drawing you in when the time is right and sending you on your way again. It reveals the direction towards oneness on the spiritual path. Although Teresa said she saw similar things happen in New York City, that any place can spit you out, the energy of Sedona is just more intense, so it may happen quicker, but it is the same energy everywhere else. Sedona is different in degree and not in kind from other places.

The intensity of Sedona was partly climatic and geological; the bright blue skies, the red rocks, the stifling desert heat in the summer and mountain snow in the winters, but the place tended towards a certain social intensity as well as many "high energy" people were attracted there. The intense level of energy meant that Sedona was not a place to live but to do ceremonies. This lore was attributed to Native Americans by everyone who mentioned it; my kung fu friend Roger said the Hopi had said of Sedona "you don't live in our church". The local Native American tribes came to Sedona to do ceremonies but they did not live there. Sedona is sacred to the Yavapai, the local tribe who occupied the land and were forcibly removed by the American army to make space for the white settlers who came from the late 19th century. The oral history of the Yavapai told by elders Mike Harrison and John Williams states that the area now known as Sedona is called *Wipuk*, the Middle of the World, and was the location where the first humans emerged from the earth (Harrison et al 2012). The Yavapai made "extensive seasonal use" of the area between the San Francisco Peaks and Oak Creek Canyon, and indeed did use it for prayer and ritual (ibid: 40). The issue they raise with the current development and use of Sedona is that they are concerned they will not be able to access the land for ritual use . The one Navajo I did know who intermittently lived in Sedona was a musician. While he thought the vortexes were made up by white people to make money, he agreed that Sedona was sacred. He said people were not meant to live there,

they were only meant to go there for short visits and then leave. If they tried to stay, bad things could happen. When I asked him why he lived there, he said it was the only place in the area where he could make a living from playing music, due to the tourism. An Apache-Navajo man who joined a solstice ceremony I attended on Cathedral Rock said it was a site meant to be used for ceremony, and that it was good that people continued to hold ceremonies there and honour the land.

There were differences of opinions about Sedona as a sacred space and as a developed place among scholars, elders, and individual tribal members, which leads to an important point: not all "Native Americans" are the same. The term is a homogenisation of a diversity of different tribes, customs, and relations with white Americans[13]. In Northern Arizona the local tribes are the Yavapai, Apache, Navajo, Hopi, Hualapai, and Havasupai. The different tribes had varied histories with the white settlers, some such as the Navajo and Apache fought wars against the US Army, while others such as the Hopi did not (Sheridan 2012: 67-108). These histories carry different weights. Contemporary individual tribal members have different relations with and opinions of white Americans and this carries over to the social relations involved in spirituality. For example Sun Bear, a member of the Ojibwe-Chippewa, actively sponsored non-Native use of Native American ceremonies such as the sweat lodge, something other tribal members, such as the Lakota Council, vehemently rejected (Wallis 2003: 205-207). These differences are elided under broad generalisations about 'Native Americans'.

What unites the tribes remaining in the US on reservations is a history of trauma and oppression, explicit and premeditated genocide followed by cultural genocide, resource appropriation, and broken agreements (Sheridan 2006, 2012; Deloria 1998; Aldred 2000; Kelley and Francis 1994; Pasternak 2010; Deloria 2003). In Northern Arizona, this violence played out in different ways for different tribes. The Yavapai were moved to a reservation near Camp Verde, a town to the west of Sedona in the

[13] The term "Native American" is not used by roughly half of the tribal peoples in North America, preferring instead the term "American Indian". The civil rights movement for Native Americans was led by a loose network called the American Indian Movement. "Native American" is seen as the term white people use for them, and "Indian" is reinterpreted to mean "with God" by activist Russell Means; while others see "American Indian" as too close to the US government language used for them, for example in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, see Deloria 2003: 1-20, Wilkins 2011, Marshall 2008.

Verde Valley, where they were merged with the Western Apache (Braatz 2003; Ivakhiv 2001: 151-152). To the north of Flagstaff is the Navajo Nation extending into southern Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico, which surrounds the much smaller Hopi reservation. The Navajo fought and were beaten by the US army and then led by mountain man Kit Carson on a forced march to New Mexico, where many died of starvation and smallpox; they were later allowed to return to their ancestral land in the Four Corners area (Kelley and Francis 1994: 17-18). The Hopi reservation was created on their ancestral land, the villages atop a series of mesa in northeast Arizona, however, the Navajo Nation was created around them completely engulfing the Hopi and creating several areas of resource dispute between the two hostile groups (Whiteley 1988). The loss of diversity in talk of undifferentiated 'Native Americans' allows for reification of an oppressed other, which in turn allows them to be seen as white Americans want them to appear.

The Native Americans appeared frequently in explanations of Sedona's specialness, despite the fact they had been forcibly removed from the town itself. 'Native American' is an image used to symbolise a utopian vision of society. When those involved in spirituality talk about 'the Native Americans', they are talking about their own idealised form of the Native, who is closer to nature, peaceful, and spiritual, one who is uncorrupted by 'Western' civilisation (Znamenski 2007: 275-305; Kuper 2005: 206; Davis 2002: 184-187). It is an image that does not exist, and bears little relation to the social reality of Native American tribes currently living in Northern Arizona. It is an emblem of all the things they feel are missing in their own society. Opposing this image is its obverse; the disorderly and uncontrollable Savage, the drunken Indian. The Navajo and Hopi in Flagstaff and other border towns were impugned as "trogs" by white residents; a racist pejorative used for all Natives regardless of tribe that also carried the implication of alcoholics, living on government subsidies, getting scraped off the sidewalk in winter. These twin images of 'the Native' dominate the Euro-American gaze on Native Americans; as Philip J. Deloria argues, since the first landings of Europeans in North America the Native Americans have been used as the other of white identity (1998). According to Deloria, white American identity tried to embrace both civilised order and the wildness of freedom. In order to feel connected to the vast untamed landscape of their new land they had to tame and

destroy it in order to claim mastery; the Native Americans were a remnant of what had existed before them, presenting both a challenge and an alternative to white domination and Manifest Destiny creating a "two-hundred year back and forth between assimilation and destruction" of the Indian people (ibid: 5). It is through this ambivalent and indeterminate other that white America understands and constructs its own identity.

Identity is produced in part through sacred sites, which carry the memory of significant events and embody the shared values of collectivities (Chidester and Linenthal 1995). In the American West, this identity was constructed through patterns of selective remembering and forgetting, such as in the creation of This Is The Place monument in Utah by the Mormons, a monument that remembered the founding of the Salt Lake Valley settlement by Mormon pioneers in such a way as to embrace them in a wider American identity as pioneers and tamers of the West whilst forgetting the history of persecution of the Mormons by Protestant Americans and the persecution of the Native Americans by the Mormons (Patterson 2015). The Mormons were able to lay claim to the land and identify with mainstream America through the removal of the Utes and Shoshone. Sheridan relates a similar story of the Santa Cruz Valley in Southern Arizona where the Tohono O'odham were dispossessed in order for developers to mine, farm, and then build retirement communities (2006). Sheridan argues that the vast and empty "space" of the American West was produced through the systematic violation and removal of Native American peoples by white Americans (ibid: 6). Connecting the sacredness of Sedona to the Native Americans must be read against this historical inheritance.

There is also a problem in claiming that because it is sacred to Native Americans its sacrality is therefore available for universal appreciation. Sacred space and time have specific conceptualisations in Native American religions especially when compared to American Christianity, which spirituality still largely draws on. Native American religions have no sense of alienation from nature, all creation is good because there was no fall from grace; sacred space and time are therefore characterised by continuity not rupture (Deloria 2003: 61-75, 275-285). Most tribes have a sacred centre of their ancestral lands which is permanent in that it came into being with creation and not with a historical event; it is identified with that tribe, who accept responsibility for it and

relate all historical events within its confines, for example Navajo land has four sacred mountains that mark its extent. This understanding of sacred space cannot be easily taken on and extended to people beyond the tribe because they do not have the same continuous relationship, responsibility, and identification with it. This close association with the land is why generally Native Americans do not reveal sacred spaces willingly or tell those not in tribe about ceremonies held there (ibid: 66-67). To claim the vortexes as somehow 'Native American' can be seen as an attempt at cultural assimilation, taking a space that is sacred to a specific group, the Yavapai, and claiming it for white Americans instead.

The recorded history of genocide of the Native Americans is rarely addressed by those involved in spirituality. They seem instead to prefer to a mythological reconstruction of history that relocates the Native Americans as ancient aliens. Sites sacred to the Native Americans were often credited with being popular with extraterrestrials; both responded to the heightened energy of the spots. Some even made a link between aliens and indigenous people who were either extraterrestrial races that landed on Earth or were visited by and given advanced knowledge or technology by extraterrestrials (Denzler 2001: 144-147). The Hopi in particular were associated with the "star people" and a number of my informants claimed there was a Hopi prophecy of the "fourth world" brought by the Blue Kachina that was another way of talking about the ascension to the fourth dimension. During a trip to Old Oraibi, a Hopi village on their reservation, a Sedona resident I was travelling with asked where the monument with the prophecy was located; she was met with only bemusement from the Hopi woman at the general store, who instead pointed the way to the memorial for Kit Carson. This alternate history of the Native Americans, as star people landed on Earth for the spiritual renewal of those alive now, was a way of reinscribing 'the Native' and 'the alien', making the native into the alien and conceptually dispossessing the Native Americans of their prior right to the land, mirroring political discourses on immigration that turn Mexicans in a land that once was Mexico into 'illegal aliens' (De León 2015).

Even for those who did not talk about aliens, Sedona was given an ancient pedigree because the energy came from the earth itself, and was known to people who inhabited the land before the Native Americans. Sedona is said to be built on an ancient

Lemurian city, although in some versions it is just a temple, made of crystals. Lemuria is an ancient lost continent suggested by 19th century European occultists to coexist with Atlantis and destroyed by the same cataclysm as that continent (Hanegraaff 1996: 309-312; Hammer 2004: 99-101). Lemuria was an ancient society of advanced spirituality, the sister to Atlantis, which was an ancient society of advanced technology; the militaristic and materialistic Atlanteans caused the cataclysm that destroyed both continents. In some accounts, after the destruction the Atlanteans and Lemurians scattered, mixed with, and transformed indigenous peoples across the globe. The crystal city under Sedona was powerful because it was built on the intersection of the ley-lines that cross the earth, which Lemurians had knowledge of as a more spiritually advanced race. Reading ley-lines meant tuning into the currents of earth energy crossing the planet in a grid formation, likened to feeling the pulse of the earth's circulatory system (Ivakhiv 2001: 24-29). This alternate history rewrites the sacred geography of America, replacing the indigenous Native Americans with the earlier Lemurians. The people in Sedona following spirituality are their heirs, and as such they belong there; they have a legitimate claim to the land. They are not immigrants or occupiers; they are the spiritual descendants of the true first people.

If the special energy of Sedona is caused by the physical properties of the land itself, then it would follow that the same phenomena could be observed elsewhere. The concept of ley-lines as crisscrossing the earth with this special energy underpins the idea that there are other sacred sites, similar to Sedona, around the world. The most commonly mentioned were Mount Shasta in California, Maui in Hawaii, Machu Picchu in Peru, Glastonbury in England, and the Pyramids in Egypt (Olson 2004; Hammer 2004: 89). It was common for my informants to travel between them, with certain destinations being more popular, such as Maui and Mount Shasta, which were perceived as easier to get to and politically more stable (McCarthy 2003; Rothstein 2007). The international network of sacred sites and the population of mostly young, seasonally or nominally employed people that work in them speaks to the universalism of spirituality and the growing popularity of 'spiritual tourism' (Stuart 2002). It is possible to align with the universe through any culture's sacred sites because they are all part of the same energy. Everything is translatable in the universalist framework of spirituality. Things

have essences which are represented differently in different languages and places. Culture is epiphenomenal to the energy of the universe. Spirituality transcends all other forms of knowledge for those involved in it; what they 'feel' through intuition is more important than what they 'know' through reading, hearing, seeing.

The universalist framework of spirituality based as it is on a pantheistic notion of energy recalls the scholarly work of Mircea Eliade, who took an essentialist stance that religion is a natural characteristic of humanity (1959). For Eliade, religion is concerned with human relations with the sacred, which is an inherent part of existence; sacred spaces are an "irruption" of this integral power of the numinous, such experiences he called hierophanies or theophanies (ibid: 26). Mountains are sacred, therefore, because the sacred is real essence that breaks into the human, social world and large, imposing rocks are particularly able convey this power. In social science, Eliade's approach has been eclipsed by that of Durkheim, who saw religion as a social function created by people to integrate society (1995). For Durkheim, the sacred is produced by human activities and mirrors the social configurations that it operates to knit together. Therefore it is not important whether it is a mountain that is sacred or not, what matters is how the mountain functions to bring cohesion and stability to the society that considers it sacred (Marske 1987: 12). What unites these two approaches is a configuration of the sacred and its separation from the profane as central to religious life.

My informants tended towards Eliade's position. When I asked if Sedona was sacred, they replied "of course" and moved on to other topics. For believers, the sacred simply is, it is immanent, it stems from the presence of divinity itself. Yet, as this chapter relates, there was still much divergence on whether the vortexes were 'real' or not. In recounting the historical production of the vortex sites, such as the change in position of the Airport Mesa vortex and the beginning of vortex tours, certain Sedona residents undermined the belief that the sacred is immanent. These stories emphasise the social construction of the sacred; the way it is created, changed, and negotiated by social agents. Indeed, by highlighting how it was useful to move the Airport Mesa vortex, this approximates a Durkheimian position. The vortexes were created by humans and became part of how Sedona functions socially. Eliade's understanding of the sacred is a believer's perspective; Durkheim's is a non-believer's.

Yet, recalling Vivienne, who did not believe in the vortexes, she still felt there was something special about Sedona. Why choose to retire in Sedona and not Kingman, where she already lived? The answer is that Sedona is a beautiful area, set in red rock canyons, with blooming orchards and foliage from the freshwater creek that runs down and through the canyons, and Kingman is a dry, high desert wasteland populated only because of its proximity to a major east-west highway, the I-40. The sacred may be produced by human action, but humans are not indiscriminate in where they choose as sacred. Ivakhiv offers a third way between Eliade and Durkheim in arguing that nature is a participant in this process because the specific type of nature interacts with people's notions of divinity and sacrality, making some formations of rock and dirt more likely to be seen as inhabited by the divine than others (2001: 45). What I emphasise is that this process is not neutral; the way space is made sacred is part of the structural violence of capitalism. For Sedona to be occupied by white Americans who can then 'feel' its special energy, the material existence of the Native Americans was destroyed and they were rhetorically turned into spiritual essence that helps white people connect to the land they took. The sacred is easier to 'feel' when there are fewer other humans in it.

Denatured Nature: How Beautiful the Land is Without Other People

We sat at dinner discussing vortexes. Everyone gave their opinion. Lana's sister said it was powerful because so many people had meditated there; an accumulation in a specific space of the spiritual energy generated through the practice of meditation. Lana offered that she had heard they were "power spots" but did not think that was what made the area special. What attracted her was the landscape, it looked like the earth was naked, all cracked open and on the surface, the interior of the earth was revealed in the canyons of Sedona. Nature and its expression in the landscape were central to Lana's spirituality. Being in nature and connecting with nature was how she experienced divinity but moreover it was a way for her to "just be me". Lana called her practice "neo-shamanic", however she did not call herself a shaman. She was aware of the criticisms of Native Americans against white shamans, and so did not adopt any

particular tribe's practice (see Wallis 2003; Aldred 2000; Kehoe 2000). She was fascinated by Native Americans, still, and had spent time with the Lakota and Iroquois, learning some practices. There was a difference, she emphasised, between traditional and non-traditional Natives, and only the traditional ones on the reservation had valid information. The techniques she used she found herself through being outside in nature, and then trying them out and seeing what worked, she told me. This was then "validated" not "influenced" by learning about Native American practices.

Lana worked as a corporate consultant, that was her paying job, and on the side she offered neo-shamanic retreats for free, although attendees had to pay the cost of their trip to Sedona. Most of the people who attended the retreats had also been corporate clients of hers at some point. The techniques she used in retreats were vision quests, medicine walks, talking sticks or "way of the council", prayer, and the creation of sacred space. I was particularly interested in how she created sacred space, and if it was created by human action or found out in nature and accessed by humans. She said it was a "co-creation" of humans and nature. She demonstrated this by saying "shhh...." and we both quieted and all that could be heard was the wind and the birds, she said "remember to breathe" so I breathed deeply; a few moments went by and she touched my arm ever so softly and said, "we just created sacred space". But she also said there was a deficiency in the explanation, there was a facet she could not really explain, something ineffable. She wondered whether English had lost the words to talk about the sacred.

Vision quests, medicine walks, and using a talking stick to speak during a meeting or "council" are Native American practices. Lana's use of these practices was not explicitly linked to affiliation with any particular tribe, and like Amelia, seemed divorced from its original context and rewrapped in American cultural expectations. The neo-shamanic practices of both had strong influences from the scion of Western shamanism Michael Harner (Johnson 2003). Lana used the practices at both her neo-shamanic retreats and corporate consultancy work and the value for her was that they worked across contexts. She told a story of reinterpreting a Native American long dance as a "team building simulation" on a corporate retreat to great success. For Lana, the practices were inspired by nature, this was the source for both the Native Americans and

her, and so it was not an appropriation of Native practice but something suggested by the land itself. This claim must itself be culturally situated. Escobar argues that the conceptual separation of the land as pre-social and acultural is part of the capitalist alienation of nature as something separate from human action (1999: 4-7). This then allows for the 'mastery' of nature through human actions acting upon nature-as-object.

Lana was in her fifties, originally from Pennsylvania, petite and blonde. She had never married and had no children. She was raised Catholic, with four siblings all younger than she was. She was one of my few informants who identified herself as politically active in support of a particular party, the Democrats. Her diet was vegan. An outward-bound instructor in her twenties, this precipitated her love of exploring nature before she had any idea about spirituality. Her corporate consultancy work was located mainly in Central Florida, she owned a second home in Sedona where she held retreats. Lana told me she suffered from fibromyalgia, and was in pain when not moving, so she felt the constant compulsion to get out and move, especially hiking among the red rocks. Her adrenals and neurotransmitters were shot, so she could not sleep, and suffered from anxiety and dizziness, among other symptoms. She suffered for years with biomedical doctors only willing to give her sleeping pills. Then she went to a naturopath, who got her off the sleeping pills, and replaced them with herbal remedies. These problems were caused by her high-powered corporate consultancy job, she believed, which was high stress, required long hours, frequent international travel, changing time zones; conditions which encouraged poor sleep and diet. The way she did her job had destroyed her body. There were energetic problems of this job; she felt it drained her without giving back so it was not an equal exchange. This was common, she said, a lot of professional women and executives get fibromyalgia from burning out and not taking care of themselves. She came to Sedona, partly, for healing; she believed the land itself was "energetic" and had healing effects.

The most common response to the question what makes Sedona special or different, from those involved in spirituality and those not, was that it was so beautiful. What made it beautiful was the nature – the red rocks, the big skies, the arboreal riparian area. This can be seen as part of a wider trend in American religion, something Albanese calls "nature religion" where divinity is turned to in nature or nature is perceived as

divinity (1990, 2002). This historical trajectory in American religion is found vividly in the works of the transcendentalists, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau (Gatta 2004; Myerson 2000; Newman 2005). Like spirituality, transcendentalism described a pantheistic notion of divinity revealed most immediately in nature, in which the divine emanates from a single source that communicates through intuition. Nature is appreciated as a microcosm of the macrocosm of the universe; a correspondence which suggests the shared roots of nature religion and western esotericism (Versluis 1993; Albanese 2007).

The significance of nature in America is political as well as religious; the immensity and grandeur fuelling imperialist visions of Manifest Destiny as well as claims that it is a substantiation of the divine. It is particularly the concept of wilderness that is elaborated as sacred as it combines "the sacred grandeur of the sublime with the primitive simplicity of the frontier" (Cronon 1996: 80). This view of nature, most appositely in the form of wilderness, as sublime in the Kantian sense, has spread widely throughout spirituality and beyond (Albanese 2002; Marx 2008; Stoll 2007; Arnould

The San Francisco Peaks

and Glon 2006). As more people disengage from organised religion as Lana had, appreciation of nature as a form of religiosity seems to be particularly appealing.

This speaks to a much larger discourse than Sedona; the investment of the American landscape with divinity. Arizona is a focal point for this process because its geological formations invoke potent images of American identity: the sublime and the frontier. Part of being in Northern Arizona, rather than the desertified south, is living within 'big nature'. The area contains the San Francisco Peaks and the Grand Canyon, as well as Sedona. Thom, who was born in Flagstaff and grew up in the area, told me that these sites were connected. The Peaks are a "holy mountain" to the Native Americans, it brings water and life to the land around it, the Grand Canyon is the "amphitheatre to the gods", and Sedona is the "great valley"[14]. He went on to suggest that to see why this area is sacred, I should go up to the top of Mingus Mountain, from there see the whole valley, and see how the Peaks feed the rivers, the snow from them and the springs create year round flowing fresh water, one of the only places in the state that has this. The mountain is life; it brings water to the valley, it makes it green. All around it is desolate desert where nothing grows, then suddenly there is this area, verdant and alive, and that is why it is sacred. To him, it seemed like God must have put this here, put all this life here, in fact it is God. God is all life, all things, and what we see as nature is in fact the face of God. This embodies the sentiment of nature religion; that the complexion of the landscape is an embodiment of divinity.

While such statements can be taken as arbitrary; the product of continuous association with a particular area over time that would be the same if this individual grew up in Kingman or Tucson; there is perhaps more to it than pure social constructionism allows. The desert regions of southern Arizona are not susceptible to the same level of spiritual elaboration as the 'big nature' in the north. The sublime according to Kant is an aesthetic experience defined by immensity; it overwhelms by its sheer scale (Kant 2011; Klinger 1995). The vastness of the Grand Canyon is therefore more than a massive hole in the ground that hinders development (as the first Spanish

[14] He used "great valley" in the meaning given to it in the *Land Before Time* movies where a group of young dinosaurs go looking for a mythical "great valley" with plentiful water and vegetation all year round, habitable and safe from the monsters that destroyed their home.

explorers thought); its scale is a way to approach the immensity of divinity. In both transcendentalism and spirituality, the Kantian sublime is a pre-existing idea to be grasped by intuition. The sublime is an inherent aspect of the landscape waiting to be perceived, 'felt', by those sensitive to it. The Peaks are sacred because they give life through providing water and biodiversity to the area around the mountains; this life-giving power mirrors that of divinity. The sublime is life but it is also death. Siegel analyses student responses to the landscape around Cornell and notes the recurrence of death images and thoughts of suicide in the non-suicidal (1981). The sublime is too much to comprehend; death allows comprehension, providing fixity in the face of the abyss. The apocryphal reputation Cornell has earned as a suicide capital was also attributed by my informants to Sedona; there were persistent rumours of people walking off onto the trails and taking their own lives, getting lost forever in the immensity of nature. The sublime is a way to comprehend what is ultimately incomprehensible, the source of life and death, a way to behold the 'face of God'.

Associating nature with divinity in this way seems straightforward, however, it is easy to overlook that what is meant by 'nature' is not self-evident. Humans take the raw materials of the earth and sculpt it in specific ways; as a garden may be literally constructed to appear wild and untamed so too is the concept of nature (Sennett 2008: 140-141). Nature suggests what exists beyond humans yet humans continually select, cultivate, and represent nature in specific ways. Cronon calls nature a "contested terrain", at once universally real and culturally variable, seemingly self-evident yet difficult to speak about precisely (1996: 51). He describes the varied meanings imbued in the term 'nature' that moralise, deify, technologise, and commodify something that is meant to be inherent, prima facie, and, essentialist. As suggested above, in America the concept of wilderness above all other kinds of nature is revered. Cronon claims that it has become 'sacred' as the symbol of the frontier and the birth of the nation. As the nation became more industrialised and urbanised, wilderness remained as the last bastion of the 'real' America. It had to be protected in order to save America itself (ibid: 76). Its preservation required its circumscription. The wilderness has been legally defined through the creation of National Parks since 1872, once it had been demarcated on a map it could then be regulated by the government, through the National Park

Service, the Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management (Grusin 2004). The way to experience wilderness is to drive there in a car on a highway, pay an entrance fee to a government agency, and walk along trails marked and maintained.

The human management of wilderness was reinforced to me during the government shutdown of late 2013 over the Affordable Care Act that changed the way healthcare is financed. The National Park Service was closed, and so the Grand Canyon was 'closed'. It was of course still there, a great gaping hole in the ground, however the multitudes of disgruntled tourists that still came could not visit. The highway leading to the South Rim was blocked and the entrance gates left unmanned. In absolute terms it was still possible to see the Grand Canyon, by walking across the plateau to the chasm itself, but in social terms, it was inaccessible. This shows the fragile ground the ideal of wilderness is built upon, its image is of 'wild-ness': no civilisation, no government, no humans even. Yet when humans thousands of miles away could not agree on whether government-subsidised healthcare was a good idea, the wilderness was closed. Wilderness is not natural, it is a human concept, and when humans are no longer there, the wilderness does not exist. Perhaps in some ways, wilderness as a concept is like Sedona's vortexes. Its power can be felt by humans, they search for ways to access, protect, or commodify it, but ultimately when the humans are not there, it is only rocks and trees and dirt.

Darling locates the American conceptualisation of wilderness in processes of the material construction of nature, which she argues is an integral part of capitalism, a system that inevitably destroys nature because of the requirement for infinite economic growth (2005: 1029-1030). To compensate for this, pockets of 'nature' called 'wilderness' are saved in order to appreciate through touristic activities that push out the prior occupants and non-capital generating land uses The material production of nature is regulated by state and federal government policy and affected by disputes such as the government shutdown which caused the 'closure' of the Grand Canyon. The material production of nature determines who has access to the land and for what purposes; it goes beyond an abstract cultural construction of nature. The material processes through which nature is produced constitute structural violence. In making the Grand Canyon, the Native Americans were removed, highways were built, access was made conditional

on an entry fee, creating a pristine 'natural' space that can be enjoyed by those that can afford it. Access to 'nature' in Sedona was similarly constructed and mediated by political economic relations; the sacralisation of nature is also a naturalisation of power.

The Transcendence of Society through Nature

The vortexes stand metonymically for Sedona, and what makes Sedona special is its beautiful landscape. The multivalent processes through which Sedona is produced as sacred can be seen as part of an appeal to nature as sacred, this in turn is not a neutral process but is embedded in the multivalent and intersecting political economic discourses of contemporary America. The impulse to withdraw into nature seems to be a rejection of the modern political economic formation that can be seen as a continuation of transcendentalist principles. In the mid-19th century, the transcendentalist philosopher Henry David Thoreau withdrew from society into the woods at Walden, near Concord, Massachusetts. He built a house with just a borrowed axe and supported himself by living on the land. He neither paid tax nor recognised the state that was involved in slavery (Thoreau 1986 [1854]: 125). The actions of this transcendentalist philosopher can be seen as analogous to the spiritual path. In both, turning to nature is a political and economic act, as well as religious one. America as a landscape is opposed to the USA as a political entity. The USA is rejected in favour of the 'real' America of vast forests, mountains, canyons, and deserts. The notion of God's law is given precedence over society's. They find God's law in nature not in the church; the church is made by man, and ultimately, corrupted. This is an abdication of the divinity of humanity found in Christianity, instead humanity is only part of God's image because nature is, an image also seen in the land, as vortexes, or beautiful canyons and mountains. This rejection of politics and organised religion is made possible through the cultural construction of 'big nature' as spiritual, a sanctuary, with physical and metaphorical distance from 'civilisation' or 'society'. For Thoreau, the problem with society was slavery, now it is the failure of the American dream, a materialist definition of success increasingly found to be hollow in neoliberal capitalism. Pursuing this dream

did not work out for Amelia, who lost everything and ended up living in her car, or Lana, who maintained her well-paying corporate job, but destroyed her body in the process. Their stories and others from Sedona, suggest that finding the sacred in nature can be a way of turning against the current values of American society.

However, this turn is a surface reflection. Digging a little deeper into the mythology of Thoreau reveals that although he aspired to self-sufficiency and solitude he had neither in Walden (Schultz 2015; Newman 2005). The land he lived on belonged to Emerson and he lived there rent free; there were frequent visitors, as Walden was adjacent to the town of Concord, and he often went home to visit his mother and sisters, who also brought supplies to him; in Schultz's scathing analysis, he "kept going home for cookies and company" (2015: 44). Equally, those involved in spirituality were still entangled in the capitalist material production of nature; Amelia wanted to live in nature in Sedona but she had to sell Native American jewellery to support herself economically, Lana believed her practices came from nature but the more direct source was the neo-shamanism of Michael Harner and others. As much as they wanted to find the divine in nature, the way nature was constructed materially and symbolically was determined by capitalist relations of production. The sacredness of Sedona was curtailed by the wider structures of American society, the existence of which was repeatedly denied by my informants. They preferred to focus on purifying the self through right living as a way to address social problems, the individual was a microcosm, by improving themselves they were improving society.

To Your Highest Vibration: Hierarchies of Food, Boundaries of the Self

"A polluting person is always in the wrong. He has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed over some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone" – Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 1966. p. 114

A Sad Diet for a Sick Nation

The first Thanksgiving I spent in Sedona, my yoga teacher invited me to join her family for a meal at her brother's home in Glendale, a suburb of Phoenix. A sprawling Mexican-American brood of siblings, their spouses and children, and a stern Spanish-speaking matriarch, they invited me into their home without fanfare, and I arrived with a pumpkin pie that my landlady had made. She had made three, and insisted I take one, telling me that was the norm for arriving at a Thanksgiving dinner. When I got there I saw there was a table of eight or nine similar dessert pies and two cakes, so I added my pie to the table. The NFL game played on the big screen TV. Beers were drunk and chips were dunked in a selection of dips. The food for the main meal was served on a side table. Before we ate, we all held hands in a circle and everyone said what they were thankful for: friends, family, and food. Then we formed a queue behind Rosa, the matriarch, and filled up paper plates with turkey, mashed potatoes, candied yams, sweet potatoes, corn on the cob, and rolls. I ate so much I was thoroughly stuffed. After dinner, I sat out in the garden pregnant with digesting food, watching the kids play with a football, unable to move.

The Thanksgiving meal is in many ways the archetypal American meal, a tradition that recalls the founding of the nation by European Protestants (Pleck 1999). My hosts invoked this history during the giving of thanks preceding the meal, one person specifically singled out "the English" for their role in creating modern America. Of course, Thanksgiving commemorates the giving of food by Native Americans to the early Pilgrim settlers. Setting aside for a moment the imperialist history obscured by this

mythic narrative, what I find significant is that this event commemorates the inability of the Europeans to feed themselves sufficiently in their new land. The foods present in this meal are the traditional Thanksgiving foods: corn, potatoes, and turkey. These foods symbolise America as a nation. The abundance is also characteristically American; there was so much of it, more than the people present could ever eat in one sitting, so many pies I ended up taking the one I brought home again untouched. The way it was cooked maximised the salt, sugar, and fat content: yams were boiled in sugar to become 'candied'; potatoes were removed of their skins and pulped with milk and butter to become 'mashed'. The overall impression was that Americans still do not feed themselves nutritiously; they eat a lot of food, but that food is not very healthy.

These twin themes of abundance and nutritional impoverishment dominate public policy and medical discourses of the 'standard American diet'. Berlant characterises this diet as a "high-fat, high-fructose world of cheap pleasure food" (2007: 772). Obesity is framed as an epidemic within these discourses, a costly failure of will by individuals too lazy to maintain the healthy, productive body required of liberal subjects. Behind the discursive isolation of obesity as a symptom of personal failure, Berlant identifies an old story of "the destruction of bodies by capitalism in spaces of production and the rest of life" (ibid: 764). The food system in capitalism simultaneously over feeds and under nourishes, resulting in the "mirror symptoms" of obesity and emaciation (ibid: 766). Both of these symptoms are wrought on the bodies of the poor; food producers in the global south remain malnourished while the working poor in the US suffer the highest rates of obesity. The built environment and employment conditions in America exacerbate this; fast food and vending machines make food of poor nutritional quality easily available, during a working day too long and exhausting to leave time to cook at home or get much in the way of exercise, and driving is often made mandatory by distances, lack of public transportation, and dearth of sidewalks. The government further encourages poor health in low income neighbourhoods through zoning laws mandating space for fast food franchises and rewarding schools' partnerships with soda companies. American workers' true four food groups are sugar, fat, salt, and caffeine, according to Berlant, because this is what is available to them and what enables them to get through the day (ibid: 775). This

imperils health at the same time as responsibility for personal health is rhetorically situated almost exclusively in the individual. Obesity is the result of lack of will and poor food choices; the structural conditions of the capitalist food system are obscured. Survival becomes a matter of "slow death", where people live just not very well (ibid: 779).

My informants in Sedona positioned themselves within this discourse; those involved in spirituality invariably rejected the 'standard American diet'. It was viewed with disgust and suspicion. Still they reproduced the individualism of the discourse by asserting that Americans often made 'bad' food choices, however, the choices made available to them were viewed through a conspiratorial lens. Despite the hand-wringing efforts of politicians and health professionals to encourage good diet, 'unhealthy' food is much easier, cheaper, and more immediately obtainable than 'healthy' food. Why would this be if they weren't also benefitting from it? The state was, in my informants' view, complicit with corporations in creating a food environment marked by abundance and scarcity, overproduction and wastage. Poor quality foods produced diseased, disordered bodies. They saw what Berlant calls slow death occurring to those with poor diets and blamed the state, yet the solution lay with the individual to choose a better diet, purifying the self.

In her account of Malay kinship on Langkawi, Carsten relates how the sharing of food is part of the process of becoming kin through incorporation; sharing food makes people more similar (1997: 12). Commensality is an act of relatedness, a way of creating ties between persons; in Langkawi this was enacted in particular in the sharing of full rice meals among kin and of wedding feasts among the wider community (ibid: 166). Food prepared by the community could be eaten without fear of witchcraft or poisoning (ibid: 175). Anthropologists attend to multivariate ways that food can operate to symbolically separate and/or connect persons (Williams-Forson 2013 [2008]; Allison 2013 [1991]; Miller, Fiske, and Rozin 1988; Trankell 1995). The sense of safety through commensality is lacking in the attitude of those involved in spirituality toward food. Inverting Carsten's formula, the foodways in spirituality are an act of non-incorporation, sealing off the self as separate from the polluted environment through ascetic practice. Bloch reminds us that commensality is the foundation of social life, sharing food means

sharing substance, creating bonds between those who share, implying trust that one will not be poisoned (1999). The fear for Bloch's Zafimaniry informants was of a sorcerer adding poison to the food; for my informants, the fear was that food itself was poison. The food provided by the system was suspect, contaminated, and impure. In rejecting it they were rejecting commensality with the food system through their food choices, refusing to consume the food it provided. They were rejecting the legitimacy and authority of the state that authorised and legitimated this food system.

A Quest for Spiritual Purity

The garden at the ChocolaTree was decorated with fairy lights; serving a menu of "fresh pure ingredients" that were 100% organic and completely free of grain, gluten, and GMOs, the vegetarian restaurant had a contrived ethereality reflected in the twinkling multitude of coloured plastic encased electric bulbs. I sat with two friends at one of the large round wooden tables on stools fashioned in the shape of tree stumps. Hungry and thirsty; I ordered an "adaptogenic tea" brewed from chaga, reishi, and red belted polypore mushrooms and goji and schizandra berries, and a dish called "Sedona 2012" which was a spicy tomato wrap filled with quinoa, stewed potato and carrot, wild rice, mushroom sauce, pico de gallo, onion, garlic, guacamole, hot sauce, creamy vegan cheddar, and honey mustard. It was a squat one level building with a wooden exterior, housing a restaurant and artisanal raw chocolate production. As well as the food service, it sold products such as kombucha, ormus, nutritional supplements, herbs, seeds, crystals, oracle cards, sage bundles, essential oils, and decorated blue glass bottles. Works by local artists adorned the walls, nestling next to statues of Indian deities and a large lingam stone. There were oracle cards on the tables, as well as laminated flip charts explaining foods like tepache, a "traditional exotic pineapple elixir" that is organic, raw, and fermented; a supplement that aids weight control, digestion, boosts the immune system, supports metabolic activity, and enhances cell and liver health. When I placed my order, the server called "love in" rather than "order in". They deducted 10% of the bill since I was a "local", meaning that I had been there often enough for the

server to remember my face. The food was, as always, served at a languid and leisurely pace. We waited enjoying the ambiance of the garden, the air suffused with the rich smell of mint plants and the sound of live didgeridoo music. As we ate, we tasted each other's dishes to delight in the variety of foods on offer. After we finished eating, we sampled some raw chocolate; I had a "bee pollen cube" and "magic healing bar", $2.22 for the half inch square piece and $3.33 for the two-inch bar. As we left, I felt the familiar, ominous rumble in my guts that let me know I had eaten enough healthy food that I would soon experience a rapid and uncomfortable digestive 'cleansing'.

The ChocolaTree restaurant displayed many of the facets of what may be heuristically labelled 'the spiritual diet'. This is a constellation of foodways gravitating around a core principle of eliminating the aspects of the standard American diet considered polluting, poisonous, or generally undesirable. These foodways included preferences for organic produce, locally sourced food, vegetarianism or veganism, home-cooked or 'artisanal' products, raw food, and the exclusion of substances such as gluten, soy, or 'processed' food. Like the raw chocolate sold at the ChocolaTree, such foodways often had a high price tag attached. There was a diversity of approaches to these foodways, and the way these principles were interpreted was neither uniform nor straightforward. In order to unpack the complexity of the spiritual diet, a closer focus on specific individuals' foodways is required.

Findal and Buttercup ran an "artisanal alchemy" company whose products were sold in the ChocolaTree, they were also friends with the owners of the ChocolaTree and central figures in the social group associated with that restaurant. Buttercup met Findal at a kundalini yoga retreat. Originally from Ohio, Findal already lived in Sedona at the time and she moved there to be with him. Buttercup previously had lived in Paris, Switzerland, Brazil, and Africa. She used to be into political activism and completed a degree in development studies at a university in Massachusetts; however, she said she gave up on politics in favour of spirituality because change had to come from the individual, which would then be the catalyst for change in society. They were both very thin, tall with long angular faces, and they both wore similar kundalini white and last-elf-in-the-forest-style clothing. Others in Sedona commented that they shared "the same energy". They self-identified as "lightworkers" rather than new agers, which Buttercup

defined for me as "someone who intends and focuses on bringing more light to this world through their embodiment (presence) and actions" while adding the caveat that that was her answer of the moment, which could of course change in their constantly evolving spiritual journey to a higher state of consciousness. They both peppered their speech with happy little audible sighs. They artificially contrived their language to portray a more positive state of consciousness, saying, "as you love" in place of "as you like", addressing people as "dear", and referring to everyone as "friends". They slept under a copper pyramid, which they said had a high vibration so anyone sleeping under it had their vibration raised. They also had copper pyramids above their water cooler and sofa, the one above the sofa was "activating" according to Findal because it was designed according to the dimensions of the Great Pyramid in Giza and built on the Fibonacci sequence, which he claimed reflected the "precise math of nature". Everything for them was "light and love", "your highest truth", "blessed", "amazing", or "beautiful". Nothing was just ok, fine, or acceptable. Their lives were directed toward spiritual evolution achieved by raising the frequency of their energy to the highest vibration through how they spoke, where they slept, how they earned their money, and the food they ate.

Buttercup described their diet as organic, gluten-free, raw food vegan. Gluten was eliminated because it functioned "like glue" in the colon, removing the nutrients out of food as it was digested, which created disharmony in the body[15]. Soy was also excluded from their diet because it was "genetically modified" and "full of additives"; Buttercup recommended I drink homemade almond milk instead of soymilk[16]. No 'processed' or genetically modified food was any good. These were poisoned with pesticides, adulterated with vaguely defined 'toxins' and 'chemicals', and corrupted by 'artificial' human methods. These were the lowest vibration foods. They were advocates of "living food", such as sprouts, which had the highest vibration because they were still alive when eaten. Foods found in the wild were preferable to cultivated foods, so it was

[15] On the religious overtones of gluten-free diets and the lack of scientific basis for the health claims for people without celiac disease see Levinovitz 2015.

[16] Soy is an interesting case of a foodstuff that has fallen in and out of favour with the organic and artisanal food movements. Originally imported from Japan by Buddhist-influenced hippies in the 1960s, soy was marketed as a more environmentally friendly protein source than meat. Later its association with genetic modification and the level of industrial processing that goes into production has led to its ill-repute among the same sorts of consumers, see Fromartz 2006: 157-167.

better to eat a blackberry found growing outside on a bush than one bought in a store. Fermented foods and drinks were also advocated as containing the most beneficial bacteria and nutrients to help boost the immune system, but moreover because they were still living and growing in the form of yeast. The highest vibrations were found in foods that were either still alive in some sense and/or had the least influence from humans. Foods with an alkaline pH built a strong immune system and in particular prevented cancer and so were preferable over foods with an acidic pH. An interesting exception to this particular rule was kombucha, which they produced and sold through their company. Kombucha, in terms of pH, is acidic however Findal claimed that it "alkalizes" once consumed and is therefore very beneficial to health.

Findal and Buttercup's diet was based on a series of eliminations of specific substances: gluten, soy, animal products; preferences in preparation: raw over cooked, organic over non-organic, hand-made over industrial production; and preferences in sourcing: found in the wild over bought in a store, locally derived over imported from a greater distance. This constructs a hierarchy of foods expressed through the spiritual idiom of vibration. At the top of the hierarchy, with the highest vibration, are foods found in the wild, living, raw, with an alkaline pH. These foods are vegetables or fruits; eating live animals or fish would be excluded due to the principle of veganism, non-gluten grains would be excluded because they require cooking. Foods that are made at home by one's own hand have a higher vibration than foods bought at the store, although if purchasing from a store it is better if that store is local, in this case in the Sedona area, or if that is not possible, then organised as a small business rather than a large corporation. The aim of this hierarchy is to achieve spiritual evolution through consumption.

The foodways with the highest vibration exhibit the least amount of cultivation, which is to say, the least amount of change by humans. These foodways are the closest to 'nature' and have the least intervention by human 'culture', in the form of cooking, transportation, packaging, or processing. A higher vibration is associated with less human intervention. Leaving aside the other axes of this hierarchy for a moment, this association becomes clearer through a focus on the opposition of raw and cooked. In his structuralist analysis of myths, Lévi-Strauss observed that in a selection of different

cultures raw is analogous to an uncultivated state and that cooking is a process of transformation akin to socialization. From this he made the proposition that in terms of structural relations of categories, raw is to cooked as nature is to culture (1970). Lévi-Strauss further elaborated a "culinary triangle" that is marked by three poles of raw, cooked, and rotted, where "the cooked is a cultural transformation of the raw, whereas the rotted is a natural transformation" (2013 [1966]: 41; see also Sennett 2008: 129; Clark 2004). The raw is associated with nature, the cooked with culture. In terms of the hierarchy presented here, wild/raw/uncultivated/vegetable are most closely associated with nature, domesticated/cooked/cultivated/animal are most closely associated with culture. Closer to nature means a higher vibration, which in turn means it is the best for personal health and spiritual evolution. A diet consisting of raw food is a rejection of culture in favour of nature.

However, nature and culture are not unproblematic labels, in the same way that organic and processed are not unproblematic labels. The concept of 'nature' in use here, as in the previous chapter, is culturally constructed (see Cronon 1996). Findal and Buttercup's foodways portray 'nature' as uniformly positive; food that is 'closer to nature' is better nutritionally and spiritually. Nature has a higher vibration than culture; it is closer to source, the very highest vibration. By leaving food raw, culture is cleansed from the diet, bringing the body in closer alignment with nature. Spiritual evolution is the journey towards unification with source; foodways that have a higher vibration contribute to this endeavour through a system of eliminations and avoidances.

Their diet is in many ways a form of asceticism. It is a way of creating and maintaining spiritual purity. Eating high vibration foods allows Findal and Buttercup to embody the qualities associated with having a high vibration. Consumption is therefore an "act of incorporation" for them, eating the food grants the symbolic associations of that food (Brady and Ventresca 2014: 310). For Findal and Buttercup, wild food is good because its source is pure, unaffected by man, uncultivated, and therefore more natural. This in turn suggests that they themselves are 'more natural'; they are distancing themselves from culture. Red meat eating is central in American culture as a sign of virility and masculinity, particularly in cattle-ranching states like Arizona. Not eating meat is a way to signal a distance from these values, it is an act of non-incorporation

(Boyle 2011; Blazer 2014; Zeller 2014). Through their veganism, they are not participating in mainstream American culture; instead they are purifying themselves of its deleterious effects.

The foodways of Findal and Buttercup form a system of rules of avoidance aimed at purification through excluding or minimizing exposure to impurity. According to Mary Douglas, purity rules reveal social boundaries; they make them public and visible through what is avoided as impure (1984 [1966]: 3-5). Impurities threaten the social order. The boundaries revealed by Findal and Buttercup's food rules suggest who is or is not, or is more or less, spiritual. A person on the spiritual path should be eating foods with the highest vibration. This was closely associated with physical health and wellbeing. The boundaries are constructed on both a social and corporeal level. In rejecting the 'standard American diet' as polluting, my informants reaffirmed their corporeal boundaries in an act of self-mastery that simultaneously closed them off from mainstream American society. They do not eat what most Americans eat, they therefore will not suffer from the illnesses that are commonly associated with Americans: obesity, heart disease, and cancer. The food environment of secular America is considered harmful by certain sects of evangelical Christianity who also follow a raw food diet justified as more healthy (Blazer 2014). The evangelicals of Hallelujah Acres rejected the secular diet on medical, scientific grounds but following it maintained a spiritual boundary of purity, isolating them from mainstream, secular America, and elevating them as an Elect. The foodways of the spiritual diet created a similar boundary demarcation. Indeed, the parallel was made explicit by Findal when he told me that the biblical Essenes followed an "amazing raw food diet" that allowed them to birth a "pure spiritual being" in the form of Jesus Christ. Maintaining health was a way of securing and controlling the boundaries of the body against hostile or uncontrollable elements in the environment.

There is then equivalence between the social order and the corporeal order; both are maintained through adherence to purity rules. Desai's Adivasi informants joined the Hindu sect Mahanubhav as a means of ensuring purity and virtuousness (2008). They believed that the teetotalism and vegetarianism required by this sect would protect them from witchcraft and magical attacks. Purity maintained a corporeal boundary, keeping

out the physical pain inflicted through such attacks. Similarly, the spiritual diet was most often described as a way of maintaining personal physical and mental health, in the face of pain inflicted through metabolic diseases, cancers, and mental illness. Buttercup asserted that adherence to her diet rules helped her recover from cancer and post-traumatic stress disorder brought on by an abusive relationship. Desai suggests that the Mahanubhav diet rules solve "being in the world" problems (ibid: 97). In the case of his informants, witchcraft, for my informants it meant to keep out 'toxins' introduced to their diets through human processes of modification. Renouncing foods is a way of purifying and cleansing the body, which makes the body a better instrument for purifying the soul (Laidlaw 2005). The ascetic Jains studied by Laidlaw progressively renounced various categories of food until they subsisted only on water for periods, some going as far as fasting to death. The renunciation of various categories of food in the spiritual diet is similarly a religious act of purification; it is a way of keeping out the harmful aspects of the environment.

These food rules create boundaries between order and disorder. The order that is being maintained by the spiritual diet is a corporeal order; disorder is the fat, diseased body brought on by the standard American diet. Corporeality is therefore unstable; it needs to be stabilized through adherence to specific rules of consumption. The instability of the body is also suggested in the cosmology of spirituality; bodies can move through dimensions and jump through portals, they are not fixed in the third dimension. The third dimension is dense, fleshy, and heavy; higher vibrations are lighter. Findal said "our bodies are light", it is only incarnation in the third dimension that gives them the illusion of form. Following the spiritual diet makes the body lighter, it loses bulk, becomes less earthy, less fleshy. It makes the body less like a body, transforming from flesh to pure energy, from form to formlessness. Ultimately, the body dissolves and dissipates into pure light, pure energy. Like the Jain renouncers, the logical consequence of this diet is death, a process of purification into non-existence (Laidlaw 2005: 185). For the Jains, any existence involved violence, therefore fasting to death made sense, in religious terms, by reducing the violence caused through everyday living and ensuring a better reincarnation. In spirituality, the higher the vibration was raised the better than chance of unifying source and so being finished with incarnation.

In a similar way to Jains, it brought them closer to the soteriological endpoint. For the holy women described by Bynum fasting was one of the few socially acceptable forms of asceticism and opportunities for religious vocation; controlling food intake made sense because food was one of the few forms of social control women had (1984: 253). This is different to the Jains, who fasted at the end of their lives, indeed were primarily men, and were giving up control, giving up on the inherent violence of everyday life. Medieval women ascetics were taking control. In spirituality, the environment was seen as poisoned through human, social action; renunciation of food groups was a way to cleanse the body of this poison and enhance spiritual purity. They were controlling their foodways, their bodies, because they could not control the environment, which was framed as attacking the body (see chapter five). Asceticism is a way of managing the relationship of the religious, pure body to the secular, polluted environment.

This is made explicit by the example of breatharians, who were said to consume no food at all, only water and sunlight. However, unlike the Jain renouncers, they were expected to live rather than fast to death.[17] It is significant that I did not meet any practising breatharians in Sedona. They were an ideal, a fiction, a utopian dream used to illustrate the highest level of the hierarchy of the spiritual diet that was at the same time unobtainable. They were the ultimate symbol of non-attachment to food system, of separating the body from the environment. Douglas highlights how the linguistic root of 'holy' in Hebrew is linked to separation (1984 [1966]: 8). The Jain renouncers, the Medieval holy women, the Mahanubhav sect, the Hallelujah acres raw vegan all used food restrictions as form of separation from the environment, a way of inculcating holiness through symbolically separating themselves from the impure world. Asceticism operates similarly in spirituality, separating them from the environment, the food system, and non-spiritual, 'mainstream' society through food restriction. The result was life, rather than death, and perhaps even eternal life through reunification with source; ultimate purity meant total separation from third dimensional reality.

The highest level of this food hierarchy is to not eat food at all. This did not have to be achieved through starvation; it could also be achieved through the consumption

[17] This again points to the mythic quality of breatharianism. A breatharian in Scotland did indeed starve to death trying to follow this diet see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/453661.stm, she was part of the 'new age' Findhorn community described in Sutcliffe 2002.

and use of "elixirs". Together Findal and Buttercup manufactured and sold what they called elixirs: kombucha, ormus, and misting sprays composed of essential oils. I went to a course on kombucha, ormus, and essential oil fabrication at their "alchemy temple", which is what they called their house. All of their concoctions were designed to have the "very highest vibration" which was purported to be "in harmony with earth". Kombucha is tea fermented with fruit, herbs, vegetables, or flower essences added as flavourings. It was spoken about as a living entity. Buttercup told us that it would like what we like, so we should play music we like, keep it away from electronics or wireless routers so it was not affected by the radiation emitted, and create a sacred space for our kombucha to grow in. She advised us to give it "love and sweet pure intention" through music, meditation, singing, yoga, and copper pyramids. The brews under their copper pyramid were ready faster, they claimed, and were thicker and "happier". The benefit of drinking kombucha was that it helped detoxify the body; in particular it did "miraculous things" for the liver. Again we see the association of purity with life here, the intention must be pure to help the kombucha grow; because it is fermented, it is still living, so it has a high vibration. It is pure, it is alive, but it is not food, it is a drink, indeed a marginally alcoholic drink[18].

Similarly, the elixir called "ormus" was not a food but a fabricated substance, invented in 1975 by an Arizona farmer named David Hudson. The name is derived from the description "orbitally rearranged monoatomic elements", sometimes also called ORMEs or m-state materials. It is a combination of the caustic powder lye, salt, and seawater[19]. Findal and Buttercup equated it to the "first matter" of the alchemists[20]. They used it as anointing oil and ingested it in small quantities. An essential part of fabrication was to "charge" the ormus in a spiritual as well as chemical sense. The intention used during preparation was integral to this charging process because the substance vibrated at the frequency of one's state of consciousness at the time. They

[18] Findal and Buttercup acknowledged its fractional percentage of alcohol as a benefit, it could act as an alcohol substitute and so raise one's vibration while "detoxifying" the body from the poison of alcohol.
[19] http://www.subtleenergies.com/ormus/ormus/ormus.htm describes ormus from a believer's perspective, as a substance with no scientifically established functional value, it has garnered particular scorn from the sceptic movement see http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Ormus
[20] *Prima materia*, or first matter, is the starting material for all alchemical operations, particularly the creation of the philosopher's stone, the substance used to turn lead into gold, sometimes also thought to be the "elixir of life" that granted immortality, see Linden 2003.

used Dead Sea salt to aid third eye activation and was a pure source of salt. The seawater they used was purchased online from a group who dived into the deep to procure water that had not been affected by pollution and contained no sulfur. This emphasis on purity of ingredients and purity of the intention of the maker made it an "amazing substance" that was full of light and minerals. It was as a superconductor that amplified whatever intention was charged into it once it was ingested. Ormus that had been charged with a suitably positive intention made whoever ingested it a "better cosmic antenna", which meant that energy would flow through them more, thus raising their vibration and bringing them closer to Source. Findal half-joked that the main benefit of ormus was levitation; it made the body lighter to the point that it would leave the earth entirely. Here again we see the connections between a high vibration, lightness, and purity on both a physical and spiritual level.

Indeed, the body and spirit were not separate; this holism is central to spirituality. The aim of ingesting these substances is to both improve physical health and evolve spiritually because these two processes are inextricably intertwined. By not understanding this connection, biomedical doctors did not understand the true causes of health and disease. 'Health' in this context is the alignment of the mind and the body with spirit or source. This meant orienting beliefs, language, and thoughts as well as diet towards the highest vibration. Findal and Buttercup described as "alchemy" this practice of improving the holistic combination of mind, body, and spirit, which they called a "metaphysical" practice because it was "beyond physical". The medieval alchemists attempted to turn lead into gold. Findal and Buttercup understood this process symbolically. The heavy dense substance of lead represented a lack of caring, a lack of consciousness, and the heavy, dense, third dimension; the alchemist added the *prima material*, which for them was ormus, representing compassion; and thus produced gold, which corresponded with the sun or light, which according to their interpretation of alchemical language meant a higher state of consciousness, in their spiritual idiom, it was the highest vibration. The physical process of making potions reflected a deeper, inner alchemy; a way of bringing more light into one's being and then spreading that out into the world.

This kind of "spiritual alchemy" continues a historical trajectory of western

esotericism that follows the interpretations of C.G. Jung and other 20th century psychologists. The medieval alchemists literally believed they were making lead into gold and finding the secret of immortality, later on with the ascendancy of chemistry, alchemy fell into disrepute, and serious scholars such as Jung who found interest in it tended to try to rationalize it by calling it a metaphor for spiritual improvement and enlightenment (Jung 1989 [1944]). The common theme of alchemy is a quest for purity, with the chemical purity of substances acting as a model for spiritual purity (Sennett 2008: 62). Findal and Buttercup placed themselves in this longer history of esotericism by calling themselves "alchemists" and the process of fermenting tea "alchemy". The term was closely aligned with the term "lightworker" which Findal and Buttercup also used, both evoke the importance of raising vibration through association with pure substances of gold and light. Ultimately, they claimed, the need to physically make potions would recede and they would become that gold or light, it would shine from their being. The goal, therefore, is a spiritual purification of the self that then spreads out to others.

There was another level through which this process of alchemy was understood; Findal also called it a "metaphor" in a capitalist money-centred society of how to support oneself. Making money was the "lead", a dense, third dimensional process, however, they made money through spiritual practice, thus turning the "lead" of the necessity of making money into "gold", or spiritual practice, a purer substance with a higher vibration. Findal and Buttercup ran a small business, marketed as "artisanal", with Findal as the "chief alchemist" and Buttercup as the CEO. They were an example of a curious breed in Sedona, "conscious entrepreneurs", people who tried to combine their spiritual path with making money through business. Spirituality and business have many complex intersections, particularly between corporate positive thinking and spiritual groups promoting New Thought self-help techniques like est (Heelas 2005; Ehrenreich 2009).

This was a controversial combination, as a common complaint against Findal and Buttercup was that they were "just trying to make money" and therefore not doing "real" spirituality. Given this background, it is significant that they defined their company as "artisanal". Paxson explores the way artisanal cheese makers elaborate what

they do as a traditional craft opposed to industrial mass production through the use of the term (Paxson 2008, 2010, 2011). The Vermont cheesemakers use distinctions between 'handmade' and 'industrial' in a similar way to separations between 'organic' and 'nonorganic', as a way of connoting the hierarchical difference between their product and regular cheese (2011: 116). Artisanal cheese production maintains the variation that they associate with nature; industrial production creates standardisation (ibid: 118). Findal and Buttercup were self-consciously placing themselves in this lineage as a way to combat associations between making money from business and corporate, industrial practice. They were closer to 'nature' because their production was artisanal. They were turning the "lead" of commodity exchange into the "gold" of spiritually pure consumption through artisanal production.

The spiritual food rules of Findal and Buttercup constituted a hierarchical social order, where the highest level is not eating at all, surviving on air, light, and elixirs that purify the body, maintaining the boundaries of the corporeal body and the social body. This creates a body that is the inversion of the caricature of the 'fat American' supposed to result from the 'standard American diet'. It was not incidental that Final and Buttercup were both very thin. They were also tall, white, and as business owners, economically middle class. According to Counihan, in broader American culture, eating sparingly and excluding foods is a demarcation of upper class behaviour; the higher-class body is a thin body (1992: 60-61). Their diet was 'high class' in the social hierarchy of spirituality; they were more spiritual than others because of their diet. They were also higher-class socio-economically. Their artisanal company was successful, unlike many others in Sedona. This meant that Findal and Buttercup did have more resources than others; they had easier access to a wider range of foods through which to construct their high-class diet. They acted superior but they were also superior in terms of economic capital; they had a successful business, social capital, and a social group around them.

This assumption of superiority did not pass without comment in Sedona. Others I spoke to expressed opinions that Findal and Buttercup were absurd, cult-like, and self-aggrandising. Theresa, who lived in Sedona to recover from a brain tumour, regularly remarked on what she called the "right-wing spirituality" of the "spiritual drag queens"

in Sedona. People who thought they were right about everything and everyone who disagreed with them was wrong; they wore sun dresses and no make-up; they used their appearance to put on a performance of being spiritual. This kind of spirituality was like religion in her opinion. She found their actions contrived. Theresa would often comment in our conversations on the "spiritual drag queens", whom I subconsciously associated with Findal and Buttercup, when after about year of knowing each other she explicitly identified the type of person she meant as Findal. Another acquaintance I asked directly if she knew Buttercup and she made a negative noise, indicating she knew her and did not like her. She called Buttercup a "blisstard". Previously she had been involved in a community space called the Greenhouse that was run by Buttercup and the ChocolaTree owner. There was a big list of banned things on the entrance: "no meat, no smoking, no drinking, no drugs..." The negativity turned a lot of people off, I was told, it was not a democracy, but a dictatorship of Buttercup. The Greenhouse ceased to be a community space soon before I arrived, it was turned into a grow space for sprouts run by a couple of guys who worked at the ChocolaTree. The "ChocolaTree crowd" was a social group explicitly identified by others with Findal and Buttercup, a raw food diet, and a sense of superiority and exclusiveness.

Trying to achieve purity means expelling the impure, socially and corporeally. It is important to analyse what is meant by purity in this context, since it is an ideologically loaded term. Purity can mean natural, unspoiled, simple, and earthy but also aseptic, scientifically clean, free of germs, and hygienic (Mintz 1996: 85). The contrast comes from two culturally constructed definitions of nature, one that is based in religion, the other in science. Purity in spirituality contained elements of both; it was an association with nature, simplicity, and lack of spoliation and also with being clean and not leading to sickness. The foodways of spirituality were justified with reference to science, but also built on a structure of religious myth. They relied upon a constellation of terms delineating a Manichean dichotomy about food that is not easily mapped onto reality. 'Organic', 'raw', 'natural' were all equated with 'good' and 'processed', 'genetically modified', 'corporate' were equated with evil. This is the mythic structure of spiritual foodways, as suggested above a structuralist analysis of these myths reveals an opposition between nature and culture, where nature is the absence of human

intervention.

Even a brief examination of the concepts used in this structure reveals their ideological construction. ‘Processed’ food was often used as the example of ‘bad’ food, used to refer to food that was bought in packages from stores created by agribusiness corporations, something like cheese-in-a-can. However, a lot of food is processed. Kombucha is processed, as are their other elixirs, since fermentation is a process done to the raw materials by humans. Cheese is processed even when it is ‘artisanal’, such cheesemakers use less mechanisation not none (Paxson 2011: 116). Processed food is not necessarily unhealthy; it depends on what the process is and what the foodstuff is changing from and to. For example, raw milk is often less healthy than pasteurised because of the presence of foodborne pathogens (Paxson 2008: 16). ‘Organic’ is similarly a complex ideological construct. ‘Organic’ in chemistry means containing carbon. The USDA regulation on organic food mandates that it be produced without the addition of synthetic substances such as chemical fertiliser or artificial food additives (Fromartz 2006: 204). It is marketed and legally defined as more ‘natural’ (James 2005: 204; Fromartz 2006: 201-205; Guthman 2003: 46). What this means in actuality is not obvious, however. The organic label is allowed on products that have ingredients that are 95% organic, 75% organic ingredients gets label “made with organic products”. In nutritional terms, not all organic food is healthy, just as not all processed is unhealthy. ‘Natural’ pesticides can be more harmful than ‘chemical’. Organic food is now made through the same mass production methods as non-organic, and the industry is also dominated by a few large companies geared towards maximizing profit (Guthman 2003: 51). Even a term as seemingly self-evident as ‘raw’ is a construction; certain types of chocolate were considered ‘raw’ so long as it was not heated above 115F/42C (Blazer 2014: 68; Hobbs 2005: 276).

Underlying this structure of interrelated ideologically constructed concepts is a specific meaning of nature, one associated not just with human activity but with the specific kind of human activity found in industrial capitalism and the food system that supports it. Industrial cuisine is based on processing, specifically freezing and canning (Goody 2013 [1982]: 74). Colonialism was made possible by it (Mintz 1985). Cheap, calorie-dense food is important to capitalism as a fuel for workers and a profitable

commodity for corporations (Albritton 2013 [2010]). The ideological distinction between processed/not-processed or organic/non-organic refers to an underlying structural difference in the relations of capitalist industrial production. By trying to eat foods that are found in the wild, or made by artisans, or not packaged and sold in a store, my informants are trying to eat foods that are not created by the capitalist industrial food system. In the narrative of progress, machines replace humans because they are more efficient. The food toward the top of the hierarchy in Findal and Buttercup's diet is less efficient, made by humans, or even better, eaten as it is found 'in nature'; it is an inversion of 'progress'. Progress has not made food better, it has degraded it, contaminated it. By valuing purity they are valuing human work, even more valued is that which is taken directly from nature, with no human corruption at all. At the top of the hierarchy is light; the most pure is that which is the most 'natural'. Completely removed from human culture, the third dimensional, the corporeal, and the mechanical; it is the negation of corporeal existence altogether, it is not-food. This mythic system is a rejection of industrial cuisine, the narrative of teleological progress, of human civilisation, of capitalism itself. It is a rejection of 'the standard American diet' and the food system that produces it. Their food choices are part of a cosmology of spirituality that mirrors an ideal construction of the social order.

Insecurities of Self and Society

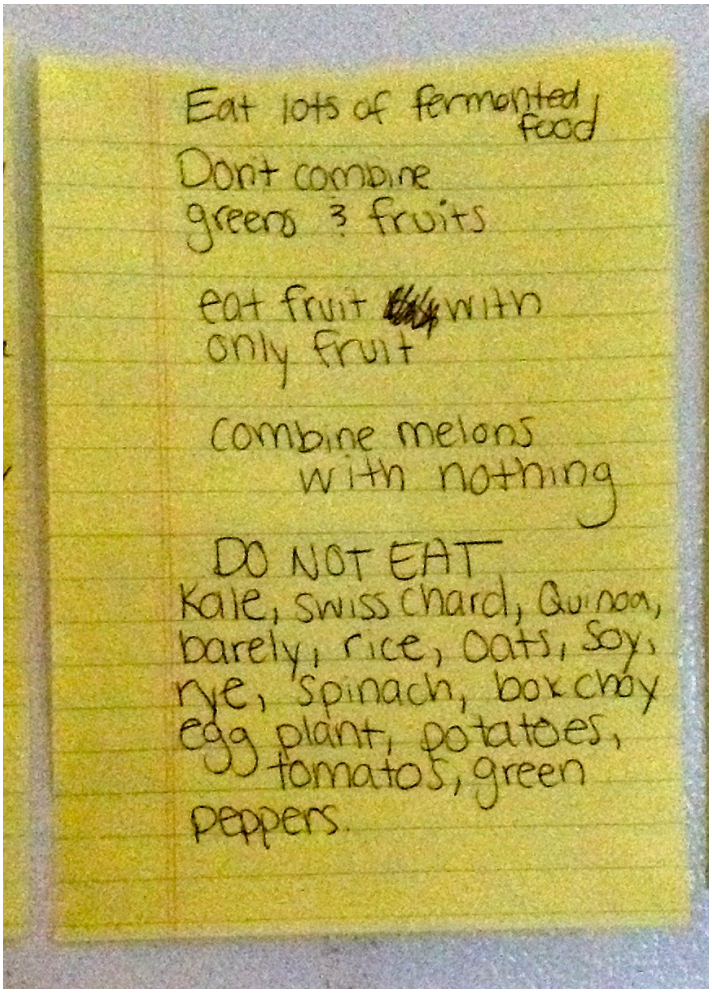
On a trip back to Sedona in 2015, I visited my friend Saanvi, who had recently stopped living in her van and rented a manufactured home behind a pizza place in West Sedona with our mutual friend, Kate. Since I was heavily pregnant at the time, Saanvi and I decided to indulge in hot fudge brownies and ice cream, followed by a large pizza and chicken wings shared between us. When she came in that evening, Kate saw what we were eating and joked that we would die of sugar poisoning. Saanvi and I laughed about how much we ate, she said normally she did not have this type of food out of respect to Kate and because it was no fun to pig out on junk food by yourself. Kate was a raw food gluten-free vegan, with a desire to train as a raw gourmet chef. On their fridge was a list

of foods she had banned from her diet, including tomatoes, potatoes, and kale; many vegetables and fruit often thought of as 'healthy', and other consumption restrictions, such as only eating fruit on its own and not eating melon with any other kind of fruit. The list surprised me; when I asked her what the problem with kale was, she told me it had a substance in it that she believed made it unhealthy, but she could not remember the name of it. Kate spoke about "chemicals" being bad for you; all processed food was also bad, although she could not remember why when I asked. Saanvi said Kate was always into the next faddy diet; she changed regularly, trying to be as healthy and pure as possible. Later, Saanvi told me that Kate ate fish, not realising veganism excluded fish.

The next day on a trip up to the creek, I asked Kate about her diet. She told me that all she ate was bananas and protein powder. She was 80% raw; she made an exception for coffee. On our way out of West Sedona we stopped at Natural Grocers, we were given a free bar of (non-raw) chocolate since it was Mother's Day. Kate ate the whole bar. She said when she got near chocolate it was hard not to eat it all at once because she usually denied herself things like that so it was very hard to resist. She also got seaweed snacks and courgettes that she ate in the car. She said being raw was hard, especially when eating out. She had been vegetarian for about a year, since she had been driving back from Milwaukee with a hitchhiker, and she got stoned and started talking about the goat's cheese he had given her, did the goats want to give up their milk? Did it hurt them? So she became vegetarian. Then she met two raw food vegans through her job at Natural Grocers, who taught her that eating meat released ammonia in the body, which caused sickness. So she became a raw food vegan. Her diet was based on restriction, refusing certain foods as she learned their harmful effects from people she knew that she trusted about food. It worked, she said, because she felt healthier than ever before, she had "more energy".

When I asked, she agreed that she would call herself spiritual, definitely, but not 'new age' because she did not really know what that meant. Spirituality for her was working on herself, having a relationship with herself, being conscious of the way she spoke to herself. It was also related to the way she lived her life, her food choices were related to spirituality because it was part of feeling better in herself, a way of taking care

of herself. To take care of herself physically was part of her spirituality. Spirituality for her was about care of the spirit and soul. Growing up in Phoenix, she learned about spirituality after she moved to Sedona for drug rehabilitation. She had been a heroin addict for three and a half years. After the premature death of her father, she started taking oxycodone in 8th grade, by 9th grade she was on heroin. Working part-time in the modelling industry, she dropped out of school by 10th grade, never completing her general educational diploma (GED)[21]. With the support of her mother, by late adolescence she was clean after attending an in-patient rehab facility in West Sedona that promoted diet over medication as a means to deal with the physical side effects of withdrawal. This gave her a new model for taking care of herself through diet. While she was there they kept her on a non-dairy, no-sugar diet, with a little meat and eggs.



The note on Kate's fridge detailing what not to eat

[21] This is the most basic form of qualification obtainable in the American education system. It is for those who do not complete the high school diploma; it can be attained through sitting an exam.

Given her prior career as a model, I wondered how much of her diet was about maintaining her physical appearance. When I asked if the non-dairy was a "weight thing" she denied it, saying only, "Dairy is gross". Her diet was based on similar binary associations as Buttercup and Findal's: natural was good, organic was good; man-made or processed was bad. Similar accommodations and compromises ensued; for example, she mentioned eating tofu and I said that was processed, and she shrugged. Kate's diet regulations focused exclusively on personal well being, there was no notion of the politics of industrial agriculture or land use or indeed much talk of vibration. 'Regulation' is also possibly too strong a term, since her food choices were in a constant state of flux. The last time I checked in with her, after she posted a picture on Facebook of her boyfriend and her enjoying fresh-caught grilled octopus, she said she tried to be 70% raw vegan while remaining open to new food types. It seemed as though the fixation on purifying her body through diet was a response to drug addiction, an attempt to physically and emotionally cleanse herself of a toxic experience.

Kate's flexible approach to diet did not mean she was not serious about spirituality, however. In general, she was a fairly changeable person. Her ambition to be a gourmet raw food chef was replaced with an attempt to return to modelling, all the while actually working as a server who brought drinks to guests at the pool at one of Sedona's many upscale resorts. This kind of mutability was typical of people in Sedona. Indeed, one of the things that differentiated Findal and Buttercup was their rigidity, especially in social aspects. In contrast to their policing of the boundaries of their social group, Kate happily lived alongside Saanvi, who ate what she wanted to, including junk food, and focused on exercise as a way to maintain her physical and mental health. They would negotiate the difference in diets through jokes. For example, there was a chart on their fridge of Saanvi's butter consumption. Kate had commented about it and so they kept a record of how many sticks of butter Saanvi had eaten, it was about a stick of butter a day. Kate's quest for purity was therefore maintained on a personal, corporeal level, but not on a social level as with Buttercup and Findal.

Kate's diet also gives a clearer picture of how are categories of food are constructed on a personal level. The way she navigated a raw food vegan diet was different to the way Buttercup did, who told me she was strictly 100% raw vegan yet she

ate raw chocolate, which as mentioned above is only technically not literally raw. Kate's foodways also bring into sharper relief how the intersection of spirituality and diet is contingently negotiated through everyday life. It was common for my informants to rely on broad stroke dichotomies of food and its sources as either 'good' or 'bad' with imprecise notions of how this connected to health or social effects. Underlying these foodways is a subtext of wealth and class. A focus on 'good' nutrition is a class issue, a marker of taste or what Bourdieu calls distinction (1984). It is a marker of higher-class status and better access to resources, particularly since 'fast food' and 'junk food' are often cheaper and easier to procure in America (Guthman 2003: 54-55; Lydon et al 2011). As mentioned above, there is also an association with the fat body and unhealthy food and lower class status. Eating healthy and being thinner often equates with cultural assumptions about how much money one has to spend on food that reflects a social reality where it is more expensive to buy food marketed as 'healthy' even if this does not have a direct relationship with being beneficial for human health. This was a problem I found my informants with lower incomes negotiating on a daily basis through their foodways.

Organic food is expensive, and people felt compelled to buy it despite the higher price because of its alleged health benefits (Guthman 2003: 46). My informants found ways around paying a premium for food they considered healthy. One weekend I spent with Kate and Saanvi, Kate had brought home a box of free organic bananas from Natural Grocers and exclusively ate that fruit all weekend. It may be more expensive to buy organic, but if less is consumed this can compensate for the higher price. Similarly, Saanvi procured much of the produce they ate from the local Sedona food bank, a friend of hers ran it and kept the best organic and gluten-free items for them to choose before they were made publicly available. The restrictive diets some of my informants followed helped save them money. Cleansing or fasting can be a cheap way to live. It adds an extra dimension to eliminating a food group, such as meat, if that also saves significant expenditure on food. Economics played an important role in food choices; indeed, the decision to eat 'healthy' along spiritual lines led to a diet that could be described as "food insecure" (Nestle 1999: 261; Loopstra and Tarasuk 2013: 1316). Food is a spiritual issue in Sedona, but it is also an economic issue.

That food insecurity exists in a country that overproduces food is testament to the inequalities in access to and distribution of food (Nestle 1999: 260; Albritton 2010: 342-343). Throughout America there are "food deserts", areas where there is no grocery store within 10 miles by foot or 30 miles by car (Shannon 2014; Whitley 2013). Valle, where I spent the second part of my fieldwork (see chapter seven), is a food desert. The nearest grocery store was 40 miles by car in Williams, there was a general store at the South Rim of the Grand Canyon that was 30 miles away, and a gas station selling only snacks and packaged foods at the central intersection of Valle that was seven miles away from where I was based. The aim of Thom and Benito when they moved out there was to live off the acre of land they had bought, growing vegetables organically and raising chickens for eggs and meat. Benito told me that the American economy was failing and more people would have to turn to living as they did, growing their own food, being self-sufficient, it would become a necessity. He said this would lead to a "homesteading renaissance", the spiritual and economic regeneration of America. Their aspirations for self-sufficiency tapped into a long history in the US; during the Revolutionary period the colonies provided all the food for the people there without relying on imports, working the land and producing their own food was an important part of the emerging national identity and Revolutionary politics, indeed the Revolution was partly in response to British taxes on foodstuffs (McWilliams 2005).

However, it was difficult to produce enough food to feed everyone who lived on the land. The soil was poor and the climate was difficult; the first greenhouse they built was destroyed in a storm where winds reached 70mph, rabbits then ate the exposed plants. More than once the dogs broke free and savaged the chickens. Open range cattle trampled through the gardens regularly and ate all the plants they could access. The growing season was only three months long, in the summer the sun was too hot and in the winter the ground was too cold. A food diary I kept for a week revealed the limits of their self-sufficiency; most of the produce was bought from a grocery store in Flagstaff or given by Benito's father who maintained a garden more successfully in Williams. Their diet contained numerous items bought from the gas station in Valle such as chocolate bars and cans of Coca-Cola and Budweiser. In the seven-day period I kept the diary, they only ate two items from their own land: tomatoes and a duck. The difficulty

of growing their own food there, and their inability to consistently buy produce because of the distance, meant they often ate food bought from the gas station or Taco Bell, where the cheapest taco cost only $1.

Thom and Benito were in many ways trying to achieve the diet most esteemed in spirituality; food produced directly from the earth, by one's own effort, without any 'artificial' interventions in the form of pesticides, fertilisers, or genetic modification. It remained an elusive goal, however, because of the lack of resources available to them. The only land they could afford lacked a fresh water source, had poor soil, and a harsh climate. They could not afford to improve it easily, so they grew very little. They found themselves relying on food sources such as the gas station and Taco Bell that did not provide the level of 'healthy' food they desired.

Access to food reifies the existing class structure. Those with fewer resources find they only have the money and time to procure food that is less beneficial for their health and creates bodies that are marked as lower class, which compounds their lower class status. Time is an important factor here. Many of the foodways esteemed in spirituality take more time, such as cooking and growing one's own food, growing food without pesticides, or getting water from a spring rather than a tap. In many ways it reflects the concerns of the international "slow food" movement (Parkins and Craig 2006; Parkins 2004; Leitch 2003). This movement advocates the value and pleasure in eating and living in a way that is more deliberative and processual than the pace of life in late capitalism allows. However, as observed by Guthman, the difference between fast food and slow food parallels the difference between working class and middle class (2003). It is easier for those with more resources, both in terms of time and money, such as Findal and Buttercup, to achieve a 'slow food' diet than Benito and Thom, who despite their efforts, still relied on various forms of 'fast food'. The foodways in spirituality were therefore still mediated by variable access to resources, that is, by the structure of socio-economic class.

They Make You Sick

Peter's cancer came back in late summer 2014. The tumour in his neck returned with friends. Five at the back of his throat and mouth. He said he did not want to do the radiotherapy, instead he would just go up to Bell Rock with some morphine; he did not want to lose his quality of life. That was before I went to Burning Man, by the time I came back on Labor Day he was booked in for an eight-week treatment, starting in the last week of September. Peter's son was an oncologist, who informed him he had 100% success rate with radiation therapy on this kind of tumour. Peter had wanted to delay by two months to try to heal his cancer with diet but his son and daughter had both objected; his son sent pictures of people who had waited, with huge tumours growing out of their necks; his daughter wrote a long email saying he was afraid, and that since he was always telling people to get over their fear in climbing Bell, he should follow his own advice. This changed his mind. He still adopted a raw vegan, gluten-free, organic diet alongside having radiotherapy treatment in Sedona. His insurance covered it, he only had to pay $30 per week co-pay, but there was a drug he needed to get which would be very expensive. He said all his friends on Facebook had been giving him advice on what to eat, what not to eat, what to think about, suggesting that the tumour was caused by emotional blockage. Peter was adamant he did not have any emotional blocks; he still thought his life was great and that he chose everything that happened to him, although he was having a harder time explaining to himself why. He was worried about the radiotherapy sapping his strength and fitness, so he was planning to work out every morning before the treatment, his son said he would be fine after popping an OxyContin.

Peter's cancer went into remission, and he is still alive as of the time of writing. His approach exemplifies the interwoven network of conventional and alternative therapies, issues of insurance and cost, and considerations of quality of life versus likelihood of remission that go into individual responses to cancer. Cancer was in many ways an emblem of the problems many of my informants perceived in the American diet and society. Much as Peter related, I was told that poor diet, negative thinking, and low vibrations caused cancer. It was the effect of third dimensional living. The body became

so corrupted by pollution that it destroyed itself; the density of the third dimensional metastasized in the body. Cancer was also described as an "industry"; chemotherapy and radiotherapy were not real cures but a moneymaking scam sold by the pharmaceutical industry whose real intent was to make profit from the problems caused by the diet pedalled by industrial agriculture. The real cure was right diet, certain high vibrational foods were claimed to cure cancer, just as wrong diet of low vibrational foods caused the cancer. This connection was obscured by the government through agencies such as the American Medical Association so that 'Big Pharma' could continue to make money with false cures; they were all in cahoots, of course. This was evident by the fact that legally doctors are not allowed to prescribe diet as a cure for cancer, nor are non-medical professionals allowed to make such claims, even if they believe that is what cured their cancer[22]. It was a total system of corruption: bad food sold in bad faith caused disease, bad medicine sold to perpetuate rather than cure the disease, so as to enrich the corporations that made both the food and the medicine. The pharmaceutical industry, agribusiness, and the medical profession were little more than snake-oil salesmen in this view.

Cancer was the state of sickness in the body that low vibrational food caused. The hierarchy of diet in spirituality, spoke of through the idiom of vibration, produced certain types of bodies. Findal, Buttercup, and Kate all followed raw food vegan diets and all had young, lean, and light bodies. They physically embodied the highest vibration. The cancerous body is heavy, dense, and old; in adopting the raw food organic diet, Peter was trying to change his body, rid it of disease, perhaps even reverse the aging process. The cancerous body is the flesh corrupted by the impurity of the third dimension; the highest vibration diet was meant to purify it, cleanse it, purging the body of cancer. The bodies with the highest vibration were thin, young, and free of disease. These are also the ideal characteristics of the body in American society more widely (Counihan 1992; Gremillon 2005; Orbach 1986). Despite the rejection of the 'standard

[22] Diet as a cure for cancer has been touted since at least the Gerson Therapy and macrobiotic diets gained popularity, see Albanese 2006: 484-487. At the Raw Food Expo in Sedona that I attended in 2013, one of the speakers claimed to have cured his cancer through a raw vegetable and fruit juice diet, however, he made clear that although he believed this, he was not legally allowed to make such a claim. At the alchemy workshop, where one of the attendees claimed to have cured her inoperable liver and bowel with a plant-based, alkaline diet, Findal was careful not to make medical claims about the elixirs he brewed when questioned about cancer.

American diet', the spiritual diet produced what could be termed 'standard American bodies' (Griffiths 2004).

Alongside a certain type of body, there is a certain notion of self being constructed through these diet choices. It is an autonomous self, one that does not require the support of corporations, governments, or doctors to sustain it. In other words, it does not rely on the state, given that both private and public institutions were seen conspiratorially as part of the same corrupt system. Both food and medicine could be derived from the immediate environment, without the corrupting influence of the industrial food system. As Findal said at the alchemy workshop, what our body needs grows in our environs; we are a part of our environment, a part of nature. Human culture is what separates us from our true nature, which is to be a part of nature. Nature is the least human intervention. Thus, the autonomous self is also the natural self. The hierarchy of foodstuffs and sources separates the self from reliance on the state, from the action of other humans; it creates a sense of self that is in a state of nature, wild and uncivilised. The process of spiritual evolution separates the self from culture, in the sense of civilisation. The highest vibration possible is light, which is stateless; the self sustained on air and light has no need for the political-economic state machinery, it is also without form or matter, it has no density. The aim of the spiritual diet is to liberate the self, ascend beyond the third dimension, both in the sense of political authority and of form or matter.

Spiritual evolution is conceived of as a process of healing. The true essence of being is spirit, we are separated from it in the third dimension, and this separation is experienced as sickness in our fleshy, dense bodies. The symptoms of this sickness are illnesses such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes, the morally valenced twin failings of obesity and anorexic-spectrum eating disorders, and pathological personality disorders such as drug addiction and PTSD. The cause is neoliberal capitalism: its diet, its food system, its corporations, their greed in selling us the cause and the cure by controlling access to medicine and healthcare, their influence in government. This sickness breaks the connection with spirit, sometimes symbolised as a calcification of the pineal gland, which is the location of the third eye. Part of the spiritual awakening, often the impetus for it, is getting rid of this sickness. The cure for this sickness is found in changing

foodways to increase vibration, raising the vibration decreases separation; it is the journey to unification with source. The more people that heal, that raise their vibration and elevate themselves closer to source or spirit, that purify themselves through diet, the greater the benefit to the planet and all humans. Fix the self to fix society.

There is in this aspect of the cosmology of spirituality an old esoteric idea, that of correspondences (Faivre 1994: 10-11). The self is a microcosm of society, which is the macrocosm. That is why spiritual evolution is seen as more effective than political activism because it achieves the aims of political activism on a spiritual level, which is the 'real' existence upon which this material reality is epiphenomenal. However, all too often this idea of correspondence seemed to get lost, and my informants focused only on their individual needs, on a daily basis their personal health seemed much more important to them than any wider concerns for the environment or social justice. The pure self, separated from the state, with hermetically sealed corporeal boundaries, purified from all corruption, was always an ideal that they never fully achieved. As related throughout this chapter, they never completely separated from the food system; they never existed purely on light. The raw food diet was too difficult to maintain consistently for Kate; Thom and Benito's land did not produce enough food to sustain them; Findal and Buttercup needed to engage in commerce to support themselves economically. The requirements of their dense, fleshy bodies persistently held back their aspirations to a spiritually pure state; the third dimension could never be ascended out of completely.

The hierarchy of foodstuffs exists as an ideological construct; the reality was always murkier, riddled with contradictions and accommodations. It pointed toward genuine political economic problems in American society, however. The industrial food system, the pharmaceutical industries, and health insurance were not run in their favour. Profits often do take priority over human needs. However, by resorting to individual solutions to social problems, the existing political order is reified not rejected. The rejection is only ideological, it is a symbolic rejection; at the level of collective action nothing is achieved. The hierarchical order of the spiritual diet reproduces the class structure. The body produced by this diet is still the young, thin body idealised in American society, the responsibility for well-being is still placed upon the individual,

health is still associated with higher priced foods and time- and effort-intensive labour. Despite the symbolic rejection of late industrial capitalism, the effects of the spiritual diet reify rather than challenge its contradictions.

Magical Bodies: Agency and Transformation

"Unless the symbolism were overt...the magical performance would be quite pointless, and magic is seldom that" - Edmund Leach, *Magical Hair*, 1958, p. 189

And the Circus Comes to Town

It was the first day of the Chinese year of the snake. We were gathered in a coffee shop in West Sedona, one of the local haunts, for a performance of the Sedona Sacred Circus. A white woman with glossy blonde hair in a long black cloak emerged and stood at the front of a small stage, garlanded in a large, restive boa constrictor. Reciting a piece she had downloaded from the internet about the meaning of the female water snake in Chinese astrology, she foretold what this year held for us. Martial arts demonstrations followed; white American males in robes performing their strength for the audience. A band played live music on instruments of assorted provenance including guitars, didgeridoos, jimbes, and other drums. Two belly dancers, one Egyptian-American, the other white American, danced together and then one did a performance on her own with *zil*, hand cymbals, then the other danced on her own with the snake. Halfway through, the performance moved outside to the patio where the furniture had been shifted aside to make space for the fire spinners. The first performer doused the two Kevlar wicks at either end of a long staff in kerosene and then started spinning around; fire whizzing in dizzying eddies around her, throwing it from one hand to the next, stopping suddenly and reversing the flow, then spinning it around again, speeding then slowing then speeding again, spinning it around her fingers, one hand then the other hand, circles and figure eights, dropping down onto her knees and descending in a back bend while spinning the staff above her torso to where her head touched the hard ground. Next, a shaven-headed white man in an orange shaolin-style robe spun two fans, each with four lit wicks, jumping up, slamming the fans together, holding precise shaolin animal

Fire spinning, short staff.
Taken at a fire jam in Valle.

stances with the fans as extensions of his arms. Throughout snow fell from the sky, leading an audience member to comment on the contrast as "fire and ice". Moving inside again, there were more martial arts demonstrations, poetry recitations, a dance with umbrellas, and finally a stand-up comic performing a fake guru parody, "Swami Sedonananda". At the close, the band played, the performers danced, and the audience joined in. The small coffee shop heaved with gambolling bodies until the music ended abruptly at 10pm, and everyone went home[23].

Performances such as this happened frequently in Sedona. Even when simply going to a party at someone's house, there would be live music, usually in the form of

[23] 10pm was the latest live music could be played in Sedona as per a city ordinance, much maligned by local performers, but upheld by the city council so that the older members of the community were not disturbed while trying to sleep. Other performances I witnessed were shut down by the police because a neighbour had complained about the noise going on a few minutes past 10pm. The noise ordinances were one visible sign of the hegemony of the retirement community in Sedona local politics.

drumming, belly dancers, fire dancers, or jugglers, it seemed that everyone would bring a skill to perform. This is perhaps not surprising given the town's history as a haven for artists and musicians (Ivakhiv 2001: 147). The kind of physical, performative practices on display at this show were more than simple entertainment however; they were integral to the varying interpretations of the spiritual path. Tierza, the snake dancer, taught and performed belly dancing alongside working as an accountant for her wealthy grandmother, followed Tibetan Buddhism for her spiritual path and found belly dancing an important complementary practice. For Roger, the shaven headed shaolin student, intensely disciplined daily practice of kung fu formed the core of his spiritual path, which he had moved to Sedona to follow by taking lessons from Fernando, a local kung fu teacher we both studied with, while supporting himself by working as a server in a cowboy-themed restaurant in Uptown. Tony Carito, a renowned part of the Sedona 'spiritual scene', now sadly deceased, capitalized on the playful, ironic reflexivity of spirituality with his "Swami Sedonananda" caricature; creating play in real time through art and improvisational comedy was his way of connecting to spirituality and supporting himself economically. Physical, performative practice was a means for each of them to experience spirituality as they created it in their daily life.

Their performance exemplifies the frequently commented upon and criticised cross-cultural mélange said to define 'the new age', a characteristic that is described variously as "profoundly eclectic", "highly syncretistic", and "*bricolage*" (Berg 2007: 363; Luckmann 1999: 255; Hammer 2004: 139). Tony Carito showed an awareness of this characterization; in a later conversation he called Sedona a "spiritual buffet". There was an abundance to pick and choose from freely, but this could result in trying too much, selecting foods that did not mix well, and leaving them uneaten on the plate. Such descriptions centre on the metaphor of a freely chosen mixture. Spirituality is depicted as being open to invention by the individual, who - unconstrained by any guiding framework - picks, chooses, and creates from the available sources to construct their own unique path. Bellah et al trace the origins of this type of religious individualism to the privatisation of religion that followed disestablishment in the 19th century (1985: 220). This led, in the 20th century, to a flourishing of "private and diverse" religious forms, such as "Sheilaism", a religion a (pseudonymous) person named after herself and

that focused on self-care and care of others (ibid: 221). Perhaps my informants could be seen as so many Sheilas, all exhibiting the type of "expressive individualism" that Bellah and his colleagues felt formed one of the "categories of basic American values" (Bellah 2007: 193). In his retrospective review of the impact of *Habits of the Heart,* Bellah discusses how "Sheilaism" gained a life of its own, garnering condemnation from the religious right, and support from those who felt Bellah and his colleagues were themselves insensitive and conservative in their support of community-focused rather than individually situated religious expression (ibid: 192). Schmidt defends Sheilaism as representative of the religious liberalism that defines American spirituality (2012: 270-271). Spirituality in America is historically constituted by a liberal sensitivity that is creative, expressive, with individuals finding sympathy with other traditions in a spirit of free and equal universalism (ibid: 290). However, Schmidt's historical account of American spirituality is skewed by his sources, which seem to be mostly the personal accounts of New England Harvard graduates like the transcendentalists, and this leads him to link spirituality with progressive, liberal politics, ignoring the sides of spirituality that can be illiberal, right-wing, or apolitical (see Goodricke-Clark 2002; Wessinger 2000: 158-203; Barkun 1994).

Schmidt's resolution to what he calls the "dubious appropriations" of spirituality is essentially that spiritual seekers learn their history and approach their practice with self-awareness (2012: 287-288). A counterpoint to Schmidt's optimism, is the work of Lau, who calls spirituality's appropriative tendency "ethnomimesis"; the imitation of another culture's traditions and practices, and she names yoga and tai chi as representative examples (2000: 3). It is the defining feature of 'new age', and as such cannot be overcome with a more nuanced reading of history. Cultural appropriation happens at the level of the body according to Lau; it is a way of cultivating the body into that of previously rejected others, whose stigmatised status is inverted while remaining stereotyped. They are reduced and repackaged to something beneficial to an American audience as a means to make their bodies into the shape, size, and level of health that is culturally valued in the US.

Spirituality in the work of Lau and others is the handmaiden of neoliberal capitalism best understood through a marketplace model (Carrette and King 2005;

Possamai 2003; York 2001; Cimino and Lattin 2002; Redden 2005). The marketplace model is also used by those who do not condemn the commodification of religion that spirituality is seen to represent (Roof 1999; Klassen and Bender 2010; Bowman 1999). Spirituality is pursued by consumers, sometimes called seekers, who enter the marketplace and shop for religion as one does socks, casting aside those that do not fit individual dictates and whims. Much like the economic models that also privilege the 'free market', these models are based on questionable assumptions that social actors are individuals with free will who operate according to a rationality of maximising their own needs and have equal access to relevant information (Graeber 2011: 44). The 'new age' is rhetorically situated to operate as the emblematic example of the privatisation of religion in modernity (Bellah et al 1985; Luckmann 1999; Berger 1990; Bruce 2002; Moore 1994). Religion properly constituted is communal and free from commerce in this understanding, betraying the Western construction of religion as a separate sphere of 'the sacred' purified of profane exchange relations (Dubuisson 2003; Asad 1993, 2003).

This same association is why spirituality is found to be "repugnant", a synonym for the inauthentic (mis)appropriation of practices from other cultures, academic disciplines, and historical periods, "the Other of many" (Dumit 2001: 66). There is a double movement: first, of bounded entities labelled 'authentic traditions' belonging to Others appropriated by 'new agers'; second, of 'new agers' from free market consumers to detested Others. This movement occurs frequently in academic analysis but rarely troubled my informants. Indeed, the majority of my informants would not call themselves 'new agers'. Yet there were local uses of this term, such as when Tony Carito posted on Facebook "You know you're a new ager when…" and there were over a hundred entertaining and revealing responses[24]. The term was used playfully, as a joke, a creative reference, a way of showing awareness of this identifier used to fix them and what they did in time and space and refusing to be constrained by its supposed limitations.

[24] Such as the response "you know you're a new ager when you bring your own organic bamboo fibre sheets to a motel" posted by Buttercup. This is a version of the American comedian Jeff Foxworthy's "you know you're a redneck when…" skit that uses humour to reappropriate a pejorative term associated with white working classes Americans.

I tend to agree with Schmidt that the marketplace model of "spiritual shoppers" needs a "much deserved rest" (2012: 21). Rather than analyse spirituality as a marketplace, a frame that is ideologically connected to neoliberalism and as such an object of analysis in the larger argument of this thesis, in this chapter the playful combinativeness of spirituality is emphasised (Dumit 2001). It is a marginal, multivalent, performative space where the freaks, geeks, and weirdoes of American society are exhibited. Tony Carito called Sedona the "circus of the soul"; the circus is a more apt description of spirituality than a marketplace. The circus is a purposefully constructed and commodified structure for play for both adults and children. Moreover, within it, other cultures are used as so many costumes to dress up in order to perform back American cultural priorities and narratives (Davis 2002; Albrecht 1995). The circus is also about bodies and their capacity for representation; through the display of 'abnormal' bodies in the ethnological congress and side-show it is an American showcase of Others (Davis 2002: 27). It reproduces and reinforces normative corporeal representation through a performance of alterity. It does so by creating a space for play; the circus is a grand structure of play.

Play has been the subject of social scientific analyses from the early 20th century. Psychological theories tend to explain play in terms of its functionality (Huizinga 1949; Sutton-Smith 1997; Bateson 1972). For Huizinga, play is at the root of tradition; individuals use different elements from different sources then combine and transmit them as a new form (1949: 10). As such, play is crucial in constituting human culture. Anthropological theories of play extended this functionalist perspective to explain how play constitutes religion through forming the basis of ritual (Turner 1969; Salomone 1975). More recent treatments of play through focusing on cross-cultural practices of child development and the formation of social relations also tend to reproduce this perspective (Watson-Gegeo 2001; Malaby 2009). The assumption beneath these theories is that play has a serious purpose, it is not pure frivolity, and as such play can be explained in terms of its utility. This assumption derives from what Sutton-Smith identifies as the frivolity rhetoric of play in Western cultural narratives, that it is useless, not serious, and therefore only for children (1997: 11). It was in opposition to this rhetoric that my informants explicitly adopted the term 'play' for their

physical practices. The Chinese New Year performance was organised under the aegis of the "Sedona Sacred Circus", which was the name for "play time" according to the organiser. There was a self-conscious effort to try to combine play with work so that work took on the characteristics of play: voluntary, fun, easy. Another central characteristic of play attributed by scholars is that it takes place in a separate spatial-temporal frame, what Turner calls liminality, where the normal rules of reality are suspended. In this chapter, I look at how play is a transformative space in spirituality. Physical practices offer the opportunity for the performer to play the role of magician, the divinely inspired artist, creating reality as they wish. This is accomplished through the transformative power of individual agency operating through the body, which then becomes a way of experiencing spirituality directly, corporeally, making it 'real'.

The body occupies a pivotal role in this process, but what is 'the body' in this context? The physical practices of spirituality are a way of disciplining the body. Mauss first brought social scientific attention to the techniques of the body as culturally variable and expressive of social norms and priorities (1979: 101-122). Foucault argues that the way the body is disciplined, especially self-disciplined, is the locus of power relations in particular fields of power-knowledge (1984: 172-178, 180-182). The condition of the citizen's body corresponds to the condition of the state as a body of citizens or "body politic" (Alter 1993: 51). Alter examines how wrestlers cultivated their bodies into specific physical forms that modelled their ideals about social and political forms. By perfecting themselves physically they were advancing a form of political protest and civic reform, a way of making citizens more virtuous and by extension revealing the deficits of virtue in the current political state (ibid: 65). The body is a technology for both maintaining and challenging social norms.

Examining how the body is constructed through physical practice in spirituality can tell us something about the political-economic structures in American society. The physical body and its visual appearance take primacy in American culture. As suggested in the previous chapter on food, the ideal body is young, strong, dextrous, and fully able. This is the type of body labelled as 'beautiful' and associated with virtue, an aesthetic value judgement that is also a political statement (Siebers 2000: 6). The physical practices of spirituality are geared toward creating this type of body, as Lau has

suggested, and the form these practices have taken in America is adapted to producing this type of body. Yoga is based almost entirely on *asana* (postures) in its American form to the extent that historians of yoga argue that it is not connected in a direct way to the meditative tradition of hatha yoga in India but rather derives from Western gymnastics and physical fitness culture (de Michelis 2004; Singleton 2010; Singleton and Byrne 2008; Jain 2014; Alter 2004). Chinese martial arts are understood to be combative and/or medicinal practices neglecting the religious side focused on the pursuit of immortality and superhuman powers (Holcombe 2002; Donohue 2002; Jones 2002; Kato 2007; Boretz 2011; Ryan 2008; Xu 1999). Belly dance in its American form is often called 'tribal style', reinvented as a dance of female empowerment based on combinations of muscle isolations (Buonaventura 1983; Shay and Sellers-Young 2005). The practices on display in the Chinese New Year performance were the outcome of historical processes of embodiment, where the aspects of the practices that enhanced and enabled the ideal body were emphasised over those that did not (Csordas 1990).

That these disciplinary physical practices can help construct the normative body suggests the essence of the cultural idea of what is a body. The body in American culture is dominantly ideated as a container with entrances and exits that are to be closely guarded. It is flesh, gross matter without animation, its workings symbolised most frequently as a machine; the body is the automaton for the life-giving force of the soul or mind. Latour suggests that, at least in science studies, to talk about the body is to speak to being affected or "effectuated" by relations with others, both human and non-human (2004: 205). A body is process, and the opposite of the body is therefore death, when the corpse can no longer be affected by any others. Rather than focusing on the body as a substance, he instead examines the body as "an interface that becomes more and more describable as it learns to be affected by more and more elements" (ibid: 206). This is a way, for Latour, of avoiding speaking of the body only in terms of dualism and holism.

Dualism and holism are, as suggested in introduction, central to the cosmology of spirituality, which rejects dualism in favour of holism. So many of my informants' spiritual paths centred on healing the body, often from traumatic or terminal illness, but more widely on uniting the mind and body, using the body as a vessel to oneness in

physical practice. Dumit locates the body as central to spirituality, he recalls Spinoza in describing the body in spirituality as "one of affects" such as "good vibes, signs of transformation, and embodied knowledge" (2001: 66). Bender identifies two bodies in spirituality, the physical body and the energetic body, disciplining the physical body brings it closer in alignment to the energetic body (2010: 90-118). The physical body was limited, and the energetic body was closer to the "true person" for her New England informants (ibid: 92).The physical body required cultivation to make it both relaxed and powerful, calm and strong, in other words, the body that could excel within the demands of American society (ibid: 106). Yet the stated goal of physical practice in spirituality is mystical union, uniting the material and immaterial aspects of the person. This goal is premised on an assumed dualism of mind and body that needs to be overcome holistically.

Intense physical practice raises the carnal dimension of experience (Green 2011; Wacquant 2004). Green's account of Minnesotan mixed martial artists indicates that for them the body is the primary organ of experience, it is physical sensation that makes an experience seem real whereas something that occurs only in the mind is ephemeral, harder to trust, even fictive (2011: 384). This separation comes from the much-debated Cartesian mind-body dichotomy argued to be central to 'Western' ontology (Scheper-Hughes and Locke 1987). This in turn refers to the nature/culture division, where the mind creates culture while the body is nature; the mind and culture are active agents working upon inert, passive nature (Ortner 1974). More recent theoretical treatments have argued that this model has been ovstretched and cannot be considered the summation of 'Western' ontology (Laidlaw 2014: 32-39). In spirituality the Cartesian dichotomy is seen as part of the old paradigm, Age of Pisces mindset, and thus needs to be overcome as part of spiritual awakening. So much practice in spirituality, particularly healing practice, is called holistic with the explicit goal of unifying the mind, body, and spirit; this is the path to oneness. The mind-body dichotomy is an illusion created by the mind; physical practice brings the mind and body back into complementarity and balance. The body is the site of intuition which points to truth whereas the mind creates illusions to be dispelled. However, the two remain interdependent; the body is dead without mind, the mind is unreal without the body.

For Latour, theorising the mind-body split is sterile because the body disappears beneath either physiological or phenomenological reductionism, and the inevitable result is a resort to holism to overcome the chasm (2004: 208). The problem is an outcome of the definition of the body used. In spirituality, the mind-body dualism is part of the 'native' context rather than an analytical tool; a different definition of the body will therefore be helpful. Latour's "folded body" is a dynamic definition, a body defined by learning to be affected by the diversity of reality (2004: 225). The body advances through learning new skills, training it makes it more sensitive to diversity, which is composed of infinite differences. One particular physical practice, fire spinning, is a form of training that makes performers more affected by the universe in the way that it is understood and elaborated in spirituality. Fire spinning begins as a form of play; it is

Fire hoop. In the background, long staff. Taken at Burning Man Festival, Nevada. © Richard Crockford 2013

gradually taken more seriously and takes on the form of ritual and artistic performance in the lives of performers. Art is a transformation of the human being based in the body (Siebers 2000: 3). Fire spinning aims at transforming the body, unifying it with mind and spirit to achieve oneness.

Playing With Fire

Fire spinning was a very visible practice in Sedona; fire shows occurred on a monthly basis either at public venues or private homes, both organised and ad hoc. My first host in the town, Vixen du Lac, was trying to put on a fire show to celebrate 11th November 2012[25]. Involvement in the preparations for this show introduced me to a group of Sedona residents in their twenties who regularly practised fire spinning and I continued to socialise with throughout my fieldwork. Fire spinning is a performance art where an implement, called either a 'toy' or a 'tool', modified to incorporate a number of Kevlar wrapped wicks, is tossed, spun, and moved around the body[26]. Stylistically it is a mixture of juggling and dance. The Kevlar wicks are doused in kerosene and lit on fire. An average spin has a duration of 3-4 minutes, depending on the size of the wicks and amount of fuel used. It is generally practised at night, when the fire contrasts dazzlingly against the dark; photographs and videos edited to show the trails of the fire were frequently taken to publicise performances or share on Facebook.

Through my first experience organising a fire show with Vixen, I met Tyler and Kurt. Tyler spun hoop; I had seen a Navajo hoop dance at the monthly arts and crafts fair in West Sedona, and I wondered if Tyler's hooping was somehow related to it. He thought that it was "Native American" in origin but the multi-hooped bouncing of the Navajo dance was different physically from what he did, which involved spinning a flaming hula hoop around his body and dancing with it. Both forms of dance used the

[25] The reason for such a celebration was the numerical synchronicity of the date: 11.11.12. She had put on a performance for the previous year's 11.11.11 as well. 2012's was more important, however, as part of the preparation for the ascension on 21st December 2012 (see chapter one). However, all of the fire spinners dropped out before the performance date and the night was instead a cavalcade of disparate performances of poetry, song, and Vixen herself standing with a microphone humming and heavy breathing to "raise the vibration" through what she called "harmoniks".
[26] Kevlar is a fireproof material used to make bulletproof vests.

hoop but the bodies were doing different movements. Further research revealed this origin story as an example of the invention of tradition (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983; Lewis and Hammer 2007). The hoop dance is practised by the Navajo as part of their ceremonies and performances. Although those hoops are not on fire, the Navajo and Apache in the area also performed a ritual called the Mountainway which contained a "fire dance", where the male dancers around a central communal fire performed various movements while controlling fire by carrying it in the form of burning fagots and using those to burn brands on their skin (Haile 1946). These elements were part of fire spinning in Sedona, but so were elements from other cultures. Kurt spun poi, a ball attached to a string or chain and whirled around, generally in pairs, which is an adaptation of a Maori weapon and toy (Hokowhitu 2008; Huata 2000). Fire spinning as

Navajo hoop dance. Taken at the Sedona Arts and Crafts Fair.

a contemporary form does include elements of Native American dances, but it is also composed of Polynesian ritual dance, East Asian martial arts, and Western technology (in the form of Kevlar and toys such as the hula hoop). As such, it embodies the much-touted cultural hybridity of spirituality (Klassen and Bender 2010: 12; Cimino and Lattin 2002: 26).

The historically traceable origins of fire spinning are the Western states' counterculture party scene since the mid-20th Century. The Samoan knife dance was first performed on fire in 1946 for a Shriners convention in San Francisco (Letuli and

Contact staff. Taken at Burning Man Festival, Nevada. © Richard Crockford 2013

Letuli 2004)[27]. It then became an established part of the hospitality entertainment scene in tourist locations across the Pacific Islands and American West (Caneen 2014; Condevaux 2009). From there it spread to become a common feature of counterculture festivals, parties, and raves, particularly the Burning Man festival held annually in Nevada (Gilmore 2010; Jones 2011; Chen 2009; St John 2009). Fire spinning is also an outgrowth of American circus performance; tricks involving fire breathing and eating have been a feature of the circus in the US since the late 19th century (Ogden 1993: 150-152). It is a form of entertainment, a performance of homogenised 'tribal' culture, and a new American folk dance focused on the spectacular.

The fire spinners I knew in Sedona seemed to care very little about either entertaining others or the history behind the practice; to them it was 'play', something they did with 'toys', for reasons that were mainly self-focused. Fire spinning fits with Huizinga's theory of play in that it had identifiable 'players', a (loose) set of known rules (there had to be a fire toy and it had to be set on fire and spun around), and it occurred in special spaces and times: after dark, out in the desert, behind the rope barrier at a public performance (1949: 9-11). Graeber suggests Huizinga is better understood as a theory of games, which are rule bounded, rather than play, which he defines as "the free expression of creative energies becom[ing] an end in itself" (2015b: 192). The sense that fire spinners used 'play' was probably closer in their minds to Graeber's definition. While structurally it does resemble Huizinga's play-theory, it does not approach the seriousness of Geertz's "deep play" (1973: 412-453). Very little is at stake in terms of social status, indeed one did not even need to be particularly good at fire spinning to perform and receive enthusiastic plaudits. If it can be called a game, there was not much notion of 'winning' or 'success'. It is perhaps closer to ritual in that the end result was produced by the rules of the performance, which is to say, simply lighting up a fire toy and spinning it around was considered both impressive to the audience and expressive of something spiritual. Now for Huizinga, play *is* ritual, a sphere separated from ordinary life which is free *because* it is rule-bounded (1949: 7-10). However, Lévi-Strauss

[27] The Shriners are the outreach programme of the Freemasons, see http://www.shrinersinternational.org/en/Shriners/History/Beginnings This provides an interesting link between the origin of fire spinning and esoteric tradition, for more on Freemasonry in western esotericism see Faivre 1994: 78-81, 177-199.

opposes games to ritual; games are "disjunctive", creating asymmetry or inequality between 'winners' and 'losers' which did not exist prior to the game, whereas ritual "conjoins", creating union out of a priori asymmetries (1966: 32). Following this theory, fire spinning is much more of a ritual because it was aimed at achieving mystical union with the universe, oneness over separation.

It is interesting, then, that fire spinning was almost never described as a ritual but as play. In understanding why this is, it is perhaps fruitful to follow Geertz's lead and examine what was at stake in this 'play'. What seemed to be at stake is interior; fire spinning is a physical practice that changes the individual. It does so by being play in the sense of Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of frivolity; silly and childlike. In spirituality, acting as a child is highly valued rather than dismissed. The child is seen as closer to source, simple and uncomplicated, not corrupted by the third dimension, because they are closer in time to incarnation. The passage of biological time is an ever increasing separation from source unless one actively works on attaining oneness with the universe such as through childlike play. Indigo children, in particular, are elevated as closer to source; in some accounts indigo children are those with physical and/or mental disabilities such as autism, in others it is all children born since the early 1980s after the shift to the new paradigm began (Kline 2014; Whedon 2009; Singler 2015). In Sedona, I heard talk of not only indigo children but rainbow and crystal children, who were even more spiritually advanced than indigos, and some adults referred to themselves as "indigo elders". So what was at stake in play was no less than spiritual advancement itself through connecting to a childlike state.

This was achieved through the body, by disciplining and healing the body through play. Ivy connects inner child discourses in self-help literature to the pervasive notion of childhood abuse retarding adults to a childlike state requiring expensive therapies (such as 12-step) to heal (1995). The inner child is the child within the body of the adult, the mind is still childlike because of the psychological needs unmet because of abusive childhoods; healing is a matter of buying into (and paying for) the right therapies. Ivy suggests this focus on the inner child of broken adults and missing children obscures the abuses of capitalism, such as racism and poverty, that results in violence and neglect against children of colour en masse (ibid: 99). This is an important

perspective to add to the current discussion, what does the focus on childlike play emphasise or de-emphasise in a religion of individuals within an economic context of atomistic individualism? The difference between Ivy's analysis and spirituality is that in spirituality to be childlike is celebrated as closer to source, in the self-help discourses Ivy examines, the childlike psychological state of adults had to be healed through therapy. Self-help discourses are an influential background of spirituality but in contrast to what Ivy is suggesting, healing was found on the spiritual path not from any kind of programme for which one paid. Play was fundamental to that process of healing, and a number of my fire spinning informants saw their practice as a way of healing traumas from their past.

Play was also used as a verb, a manner of describing how fire spinning is learned and acted through the body. Learning to spin was often a matter of playing around with a toy. With little in the way of formal training or lessons available, it was learnt from others who already spun, watching YouTube videos, and trying out moves for oneself. This is typical of dance, which is taught orally, face to face, "one body to another" (Banes 1998: 8). This bred an improvisational nature where style was highly personal. Thom, whom I met through the Day of the Dead fire show, explained his process of learning to spin a fire staff, "I got a few pointers and a few ideas from different people but at the end of the day you have to hang out with your staff and figure out what works for you." In his opinion, everyone taught themselves fire spinning. This fits with the individualism of spirituality because one got to be one's own teacher or master. Committed and repetitive practice was still crucial to development of the skill despite the emphasis on play and improvisation. Tyler described learning from watching others, videos online, and performances, but mainly through repetitive practice, the dedication of hours of effort to repeat movements until fluid. Benito was one of the most capable fire spinners I met; he performed frequently and had been paid to teach lessons to others. He started by playing with poi as a teenager, then branched out into other toys, and was proficient in seven or eight by the time I met him in his early twenties, including staff, double staff, contact staff, nunchucks, and rope dart. For three years he practised 6-10 hours a day to attain this level of expertise. Certain spinners engaged in a more involved, "deep play", then, which enhanced their skill level and cultivated their bodies

to produce more impressive results.

Each of the fire spinners I interviewed described watching others and then wanting to copy them as the beginning of their practice. This mimetic impulse occurred in my own experience as well. I wanted to try fire spinning once I first started seeing it in Sedona; it looked like fun. After a few months of hanging out with fire spinners and watching them play, and at the same time participating separately in a kung fu group that practised staff forms (with wooden *bo* staffs that were not set on fire), I got my chance. A friend of mine had a gathering at her house and when the fire spinning started on the quiet residential road outside she handed me her fire staff and told me to try it. I was not sure what I was doing, it was a mixture of spinning I had seen others do and kung fu forms I had practised. I kept my focus on the wicks. People were watching, someone was drumming; I just focused on the twirling of the staff, and on not being on fire. Time seemed to pass very slowly. I thought I had been doing a certain move for a long time, so I would change, without realising that I was actually going very fast. It was exhilarating. Afterward, a spectator told me I had been "magical" with the staff. This was a common compliment to give a fire spinner; they were likened to ninjas, sorcerers, and wizards. On the surface, magic was being used in a loose sense here to mean something impressive, fun, and spectacular, similar to the 'magic of Disneyland'. There was a deeper meaning however that pointed towards the potential of fire spinning for transmutation of the individual.

Transmutation is the power of the artist, who can take something and transform it into something else that is culturally valued as beautiful. Gell calls this "the enchantment of technology" expanding that it is "the power that technical processes have of casting a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form" (1999: 163). Gell makes an explicit connection between magic and art, calling the artist an "occult technician" who by his skill enchants the object he crafts (ibid: 169). An object constructed by an artist with the intention of enchantment has agency in Gell's theory, meaning it is enmeshed in the social relations through which it is proposed, fabricated, and sold (1998: 5-21). In fire spinning, the art object is the interplay of bodily movement, fire, and the toy. The performer uses their skill to "enchant" the three and create art. Gell speaks of art objects made with such skill that they captivate the

audience and seem to achieve something impossible (ibid: 71). The magic is a result of the inequality between the artist's agency and the audience's, which in reference to canonical Western art is attributed to the genius of the individual artist. Gell mentions Vermeer as one whose agency captivates the audience into believing it has supernatural origin because the skill involved is so far beyond what the audience has ever experienced (ibid: 69). The Trobriand canoes' ornate decoration is magic in the Trobrianders' conception because it dazzles the opposition in kula-exchange demoralising them so they make poor trades that benefit the canoe-owners not themselves (1999: 175-178). In Gell's theory both the Vermeer and the Trobriand canoe are effective because of captivation, an "index of superior artistic agency" (1998: 71). The magic of fire spinning operates in this way; the movement of the body with the toy and the fire dazzles the audience with its spectacle, captivating them with the superior artistic agency.

Agency in Gell's theory pertains to the art object as well as the artist in that the object encompasses the social relations of its manufacture, which it extends out in time and space. The tripartite art object in fire spinning starts with the body that is then extended by the toy which allows for the manipulation of fire. The specially manufactured fire toy is what marks fire spinning out from other forms of dance. Toys are not mere functional implements in this process, they are objects invested with meaning of their own. It was considered better to make them oneself or have them specially made by a friend or acquaintance, because this was cheaper, it could be custom-made to specific requirements, but most importantly, it was invested with the energy of that relationship. Thom and Benito called each other brother, even though they were not biological kin (see chapter seven). When Thom was in jail for four months, Benito made him a fire staff that he gave him when he was released. Thom called it Flower and it remained his favourite short staff. The staff carried the agency of that relationship that was further consolidated by its naming, which is "essentially akin" to binding (Gell 1998: 102). The manufacture and gift of the staff thus identified and extended the social relation between the two. The importance of naming in agency is further explored in chapters two and six. In this case, the staff and the practice of fire spinning bound and thereby reproduced the social relationship of the two that was

figured as kin.

Fire toys not only encompassed relations between spinners but were the subject of a relationship with the spinner. Benito carried his favourite toys around with him to bond with them, so he could practice whenever he got a spare moment. He got to know the weight because he moved with them at all times. A pair of practice poi that he carried with him everywhere for years had been imbued with "magic" in this way. He no longer used them so he wanted to give them to someone else so the magic could be passed on. Again the term "magic" was used to describe an aspect of fire spinning. This time it was a property of the toy itself, something that was built through continuous association and use by the spinner that could then be transferred to a new owner. The toys were affected by the intention with which they were made and their energy was affected by the way they were used and treated, just as relationships between people were. The toys had agency in Gell's sense. Yet the toy alone is not an art object in Gell's sense, it needed to be animated by the movement of the body of the spinner and the application of fire to the wicks. The interplay of the three created an art object that was magical, which is to say, socially efficacious. What was being achieved was not just an extension of social relationships between spinners as relations and between spinner and fire toy and between spinner and audience; the effect of fire spinning was a deepening experience of the energy of the universe, and this happened at the level of the body.

Spinning fire was a way of corporeally experiencing spirituality. As already suggested, it follows that the performances of this art can be interpreted as ritual. Indeed, it seemed to me that that was the way that many of my informants understood it. At a fire jam (an informal gathering of fire spinners) in the desert off the highway between Sedona and Cottonwood, Kurt said, "this is our church", to which someone else responded, "church doesn't have to be in a building". These weekly gatherings were held, appositely, on Sundays. However, they did not last for more than a few months. Spectators outnumbered spinners to the point where it ceased to be a fire jam; Tyler complained that the people who were there were not fire spinning but standing around drinking, it had become just another party in the desert. He and many others stopped going, and Kurt who was the main organiser got too busy with his regular job. This shows the tension between the interpretation of the spinners themselves and the

spectators. The spinners took what they were doing seriously as art and ritual, for the spectators it was just entertainment. There were differing relationships to the seriousness of play.

During my interviews with fire spinners, the performances did not feature as particularly important. It was described as an internal, spiritual process likened to transmutation or – similar here to Findal and Buttercup's spiritual elaboration of diet in chapter three – alchemy. Tyler told me he did not start hooping with the intention of learning a spiritual practice, for him "it just felt good" to play with a hoop so he continued. Since it was "play", the practice was accessible in his estimation, anyone could learn about "the energetic bodies and how being in the flow can make the rest of your life more beautiful and sacred". He described the movement as mirroring the upward movement of the kundalini, a common symbol in spirituality derived from tantric philosophy[28]. The movement of hooping for him was a route to spiritual awakening; it was a physical way of experiencing the energy of the universe in his body that helped open his "third eye", which gave greater clarity. This art was available to anyone who was able to play with a toy, he suggested, which could then lead to spiritual awakenings through "experiencing without giving it a name …[or using] words". It was the physical nature of the practice that allowed for spiritual insight because it enabled him to go beyond the need for language. The body and its movement are central to how it was experienced as spiritual.

The transformation that occurred from this physical, externally impressive art was, conversely, internal. Tyler described his spiritual path as "vague" unlike people he knew who had very specific, directed spiritual paths with lists of practices to perform each day with defined goals in terms of enlightenment. His spiritual path was more like "hopping through the forest from rock to rock trying to spin a bit and jump and feel free and not fall down as much as I can". This kind of free flowing approach to spirituality fit the free flow of hooping; it was spontaneous, experimental, and erratic. It was still meditative, however, a way to enter "a silent mind state, a place where I'm fully feeling

[28] The kundalini is the symbol of snakes moving up from the root chakra to the crown. When the kundalini rises to the highest chakra, opening the third eye located between the brows, spiritual enlightenment occurs (Van Otterloo 1999; Hammer 2004: 183-190). For more discussion on this symbol see chapter six.

my body, and not wrapped up in my mind". Here we see the mind-body dichotomy as expressed in spirituality; the mind is an illusion, something that clouds or "wraps up" intuition that comes from the "silent mind state" produced through physical practice. What occurs in the body is more real than what occurs in the mind. These two entities are ontologically separate and hierarchically linked. Improving the body through physical practice was a way of controlling the mind; Tyler credited spinning a hoop with improving his sense of balance in his body, physically in terms of helping his coordination and emotionally in helping him process his feelings. When he felt sad he would put on music and hoop through those emotions. It also helped him sleep; he had persistent problems sleeping which he attributed to a childhood disrupted by his mother's drug addiction. She would leave him alone in crack houses while she got high, places where understandably he did not feel safe. So before he tried to go to bed he would hoop and that helped him fall asleep more easily. His mind had to be calmed through physical practice, the external movement of the body produced internal benefits in dealing with his thoughts and emotions.

This was a common experience that came up in my interviews with fire spinners. Benito described being "an unhappy kid", particularly at school, until he started spinning fire at age fourteen. During a visit to Colorado, he started spinning poi after watching someone perform at a festival. It allowed him to let go of his negative attitude toward the incipient responsibilities of adulthood, and instead "find the peace" within himself that he could handle whatever happened; "it's a decision and once you make that decision you can handle anything, you can be anything. I had a moment that was so perfect that I knew that every shitty thing that I'd ever experienced had led up to every good thing, everything was perfect because it got me there". This sentiment of positive thinking regardless of the events that occur in life was echoed by many people involved in spirituality in Sedona. It is an important aspect of American individualism; creating reality by choosing to perceive whatever happens positively and using that to buttress a self-belief that one can cope with whatever occurs. The essence of the "magic" of fire spinning was ontological flexibility; "you can be anything" as Benito said. He was no longer an unhappy kid, but an artist, a performer, with power to impress and convince others. He could create reality as he chose because his physical practice gave him power

over his self-perceptions. Fire spinning allowed for an attunement to the energy of the universe that gave him control through the ability to experience external events as harmonious with his internal feelings.

Similar to Tyler, Benito described fire spinning as cultivating a mental clarity where "emotional baggage" was released. The focus required to spin fire without being burned or dropping the toy meant anything else going on in the mind had to be released. As I experienced in that first spin, everything else went away except the fire. This created a state of mind that fire spinners found useful outside of the practice. Benito described it as a form of prayer that required stillness of mind. He then adopted a similar state in the rest of his life: "when I'm in that space I don't have to know how to do something, I just have to imagine something to do and it's already happened by the time I'm done imagining it". Fire spinning was a physical practice that modelled in concrete terms the concept in spirituality of following the energy of the universe. Fire spinning required a calm and peaceful state of mind and a constant sense of awareness of a specific thing, listening to it and responding rather than planning and trying to act. This physically enacted the concept of oneness.

Gell suggests magic is a response to uncertainty, the Trobriand canoe maker uses magic to enhance the impressive effects of the canoe and achieve success in the kula because there is doubt over the outcome (1998: 69-71; 1999: 175-178). In spirituality, this uncertainty is rooted in the individual; can they cope with their emotions, with the things that have happened or will happen in their lives? Fire spinning as a form of magic assures them they can, they are powerful, they can endure pain, and they can manipulate fire, bending it to their will to make them more impressive to others. This is the agency of the art object, the interplay of body, fire, and the toy, it adorns the person of the fire spinner, extending it out in time and space (Gell 1998: 5-7, 14-17). Spirituality encourages finding the god/dess within and art can be a powerful way of experiencing this. The artist is the creator in third dimensional reality accessing the higher dimensions through their skill. Art usually creates gods; it is a way of imbuing divine presence in idols through making them beautiful (ibid: 135-143). Beauty is connected with divinity in Western philosophy; something beautiful represents the divine. This is the Kantian notion of the sublime discussed in chapter two; the beautiful landscape suggests the

presence of divinity. In fire spinning, this notion of the sublime is embodied. The body is the idol, imbued with divine presence through physical practice. The disciplining of the body through fire spinning is a process of learning to be affected by the energy of the universe, to become attuned to it, a process that fire spinners called "being in the flow".

Being in the Flow

Perhaps the most significant difference between fire spinning and other physical practices of spirituality such as yoga and kung fu was the presence of fire. Fire spinners often spoke of having a relationship with the fire. Talk of the elements is common in spirituality, figuring prominently in astrology, martial arts, yoga and ayurveda, and shamanism. The elements were often described as a way of connecting to nature and given magical associations. They were also used symbolically in rituals, for example the shamanic journeying sessions I attended with Amelia, discussed in the chapter two, began with a ritual calling of the four elements of fire, water, earth, and air. In the kung fu group I participated in, different forms were given associations with one of five elements: fire, earth, wood, water, or metal. At a "women's wisdom" course I attended the session leader specified the associations of the different elements drawing from various sources, of fire she said, "fire is purifying, it transmutes". This was a common way of characterising the associations of fire as an element in the cosmology of spirituality.

As well as symbolic significance in spirituality, fire also had a physical presence in the landscape of Northern Arizona. The area is a fire-adapted ecosystem, with an annual fire season during late spring-early summer when the dry heat creates a tinderbox atmosphere in the aspen and pine forests easily ignited by lightning strikes and stray sparks from campfires. The season ends when the monsoons arrive saturating the parched earth. This is part of the natural cycle of the land, the fires clear the dense forest; the Forest Service in recent years lets the land burn or even lights intentional controlled burns away from inhabited land (Swetnam 1990). Forest fires could easily

burn beyond their capabilities to contain them; during my time in the field the Yarnell Hill fire (all forest fires are named, like hurricanes) claimed the lives of 19 firefighters[29]. Fire was an ever-present ecological hazard.

Burn off. Taken at a fire jam in Valle

In the symbolic associations in spirituality and the effect it has on the landscape, fire is the element of change. Benito emphasised the importance of change in fire spinning. Spinning a fire staff began with what was called a "burn off" to expel excess fuel. The spinner would roll the staff rapidly between their palms as they threw it into

[29] http://www.cbs5az.com/story/22724064/19-firefighters-dead-in-yarnell-wildfire

the air, creating a large fireball effect as the excess fuel ignited as it was expelled. After this initial fireball and the "wow factor" of someone throwing fire around, fire spinning was boring to watch, according to Benito, and the only interest lay in how he changed the movement and manipulated the element. The art of fire dancing was an art of change; the changes made it beautiful. Learning how to enact these changes meant developing a relationship with the fire. For Benito, this began the first time he spun poi, "both poi got tangled around my hand, but when I got it off, I had a perfect galaxy spiral of chain links all the way out to my fingertips… I thought it was an omen." The fire marked his body from their first interaction; it was the beginning of a special relationship.

Thom explicitly connected fire with the spiritual concept of energy, describing fire as "a great example of energy in a simple form, and then there's the movement of the staff around your body and how it relates to you and fire". He described fire spinning in terms of self-awareness, "it helps you bring yourself closer to your self" but also display, "it looks really cool". Thom said that when he spins fire it was like he went to another place, he did not know how he did half the moves he performed; he just went "into the flow" and let it happen. Then it was a beautiful, spiritual experience, he felt something go through him, however sometimes it was "just twirling around a stick on fire". Sometimes it was sublime; sometimes it was pointless.

Tyler described how using fire was limiting in terms of what could be physically done with the toy; he could perform tricks with an ordinary hoop that he could not do with a fire hoop because he would get burned or because the weight was different when a toy had lit Kevlar wicks attached. The limitation that the fire brought created what he called "the spiritual sense of the art" because it required a relationship with the fire. This relationship was necessary in order to avoid getting burned, if we think about 'relationship' in terms of a pattern of boundaries between interacting agents. These boundaries are learned very quickly; as Benito described, the first attempt at fire spinning often results in a burn. According to Tyler, "you build a relationship with fire, even a fool who has no idea about spiritual practice will tell you he has a relationship with the fire and that's how he doesn't get burned". This relationship is a way of interacting with an element that is destructive and has its own agency; the fire goes

where it wants to, as does the toy, and the spinner has to navigate that. This is part of how it is incorporated into the spiritual path. Tyler related how much of his spiritual path was to do with stopping his destructive patterns, both self-destructive and externally destructive, such as accidentally breaking things. Fire spinning "works to tame that fire", dedicating himself to the practice improved his coordination and patience which meant he was less likely to "rip something out of the wall". Tyler equated this relationship to the yin yang, which he interpreted as meaning something has positive and negative aspects that coexist and interact; "it's a creative relationship with something really destructive".

The point of going through these painful and difficult experiences is to create a deeper relationship, much as in social relationships with other humans. Then something closer to communion with fire, perhaps even a mystical union, could occur, what Benito called the path to oneness. After leaving Sedona and moving to Valle, I did not spin fire for a number of months during the winter. When the spring began, I spun fire with Benito and Thom. As soon as I lit the wicks I fell into that deep intense space of fire whooshing around my body. I did not stretch myself, just went through the basic moves I knew well. It felt good to be in that space again. It was part of how we communicated; when we picked up fire toys and spun them around we were speaking a language that the other spinners understood and responded in. The social relationships between the three of us were mediated by this physical practice, it connected us; this again speaks to the agency of the art object. But it was extended beyond us to a relationship between the body and the fire that became a means of experiencing oneness. The importance of the body in the experience of spiritual or mystical states was observed by Mauss, that the means of "entering into 'communication with God'" frequently had a physiological basis (1979: 122). Since divinity was found in all things, fire spinning was a way of communing with the universe through becoming attuned with, meaning affected by, energy. Wacquant's ethnography of boxing in Chicago locates the practice as one of Mauss's techniques of the body that operates both corporeally and mentally, requiring both physical and cerebral discipline, and as such works to "erase the distinction between the physical and the spiritual" (2004: 17). Fire spinning operates in this way with the specific purpose of overcoming dualisms to achieve mystical union with the

energy of the universe.

This was part of what Wacquant calls, after Bourdieu, the "specific logic" of physical practice (ibid: 16). For fire spinning this logic was interweaved with the cosmology of spirituality; for those who took it seriously as part of their spiritual path, it lead to a finer sense of how to align with the energy of the universe. As Benito suggested, this allowed for a sense of control. Thom told me the first thing to learn in fire spinning was never let the fire control you. Sometimes it was ok to get burned because it was a learning experience. Sometimes it was ok to let the ground burn because it got rid of dead wood that would have to be cleared anyway. Yet this meant the burn had to be controlled, if it was uncontrolled it was dangerous. Developing a relationship with fire meant learning how to control something that was essentially uncontrollable. Similarly, Benito felt that fire spinning allowed him to create his reality through aligning with the energy of the universe. This suggests a homology with the relationship between the individual and society; external events with social structural causes seem uncontrollable, pursuing a spiritual path through physical practice was a

LED hoops, tracing the toroid or vortex pattern. Taken at an art gallery opening in Phoenix.

way of experiencing a sense of control.

This relationship is paradoxical; fire cannot be controlled, only directed and contained. The resolution of this paradox was found in "being in the flow". Most fire spinners I knew described fire spinning as a "flow art" and that rather than controlling the fire they flowed with it; it was a relationship of mutuality and cooperation not coercion. A female staff spinner I knew only slightly through belly dancing said she did not perform in shows; she would only go up to the mountain to spin alone as that way she could get in the flow, which she described as a different state of mind where she was totally present. This reinforces the interpretation that solo practice is more serious because it is more spiritual than public performances. Tyler made an explicit analogy between being in the flow in fire spinning and walking the spiritual path, both of which centred on "being in the right place at the right time" which meant "things just working out because you happen to have the right thing to say at the right time, that to me is being in the flow, being in this godlike presence that you can fight or you can accept as a part of you and move with it rather than against it, and that's the flow". The movement of the flow had a vortex or toroid shape for him that was created by the movement of the hoop, a shape that emphasised the continuous circular motion of the hoop and of the energy of the universe. Being in the right place at the right time while spinning meant the difference between catching and dropping, between getting burned and performing with ease. For Tyler, the same was true of life, and being on the spiritual path meant trusting that the flow of energy in the universe would place him in the right place at the right time for everything that he needed.

Benito also made this analogy; to him fire spinning generated a "massive amount of energy" both in terms of the practice itself and in his life. This was the flow, and he used the flow to travel and support himself, at least when he was a teenager. He found a fire spinning performance would lead to the next thing in his life, for example once it got him a marijuana trimming job in Northern California, which in turn led to the next thing in his life. Being in the flow meant eschewing concerns for economic security because "when you're in the right space from moment to moment you always see what the right move is next, and you always go where the energy's good and you always know that you'll be taken care of because you're walking with power so even if you take

the wrong step you arrive there with power, you can do something about it … you can just really live your truth". He explicitly rejected the need for a job that would guarantee a specific income; that was a lie told by "society". There were no such guarantees, only the illusion of security and predictability in employment, the real aim of which was enslavement. Society robs the individual of their true spiritual power to make them accept a job in a corrupt economic system by convincing them that it will be there forever and it will provide for their needs. All the individual has to do to ensure their needs are met is live their truth and be in the flow. This is the sense of control over external events that fire spinning gave him, not of determining what happened but of being able to deal with whatever happened because he trusted that it was right thing for him because he was moving with the flow of the energy of the universe.

Living one's truth was another way of saying "being in the flow" since the flow refers to the energy of the universe and the direction it moves is the right way to go, or the "truth" for that person. Both are metonymic for the spiritual path, which as a concept infers directional travel. The concept of "flow" has been the focus of Csikszentmihalyi's psychological investigations (1990, 1993, 1999, 2000). He defines flow as "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it" (1990: 4). This state is the closest humans can get to happiness, which Csikszentmihalyi sees as the ability to control the contents of consciousness through how external events are interpreted. In line with psychological universalising, he describes it as a universal concept that occurs regardless of cultural or age difference. It is easy to relate the way fire spinners' talk about their practice to Csikszentmihalyi's flow state; the feeling that everything else goes away except the fire is a state of absorption, they clearly enjoy it, and continue doing it despite burns and fire hazards. It also fits with Graeber's definition of play, where an activity is done for the sake of pure creative expression (2015b: 191-192). Indeed Sutton-Smith includes Csikszentmihalyi's theory in his seven rhetorics of play calling it the rhetoric of the self, where the purpose of play is enhancement of the subjectively experiencing self and increasing the sense of individualisation (1997: 173-200).

The idea that certain activities when done with sufficient skill and absorption and

resulting in the production of a performance or object of value and agency create a specific type of personhood has purchase beyond psychology, calling to mind both Gell's artist and Sennett's craftsman (Gell 1998: 23; Sennett 2008: 20-21). The problem with Csikszentmihalyi's interpretation of flow is that he underestimates and minimises socio-economic factors (Belle et al 2000). His work has been criticised from a cultural perspective (what counts as happiness in a given context?) and from a socioeconomic perspective (what do social agents have the capacity and resources to enjoy? cf. Bourdieu 1984) Csikszentmihalyi's rebuttal is that flow is not so much about the activity itself as the manner in which it is undertaken. The link between Csikszentmihalyi's theory and spirituality goes beyond the theoretical level; they are directly connected through the influence the study of happiness had on American positive thinking and self-help culture, which in turn forms part of the background of spirituality (Ehrenreich 2009: 147-176). This influence is seen in the importance my informants placed on controlling and directing their inner life, which as we have seen was the benefit many saw from fire spinning.

There is a problem, however, with believing that control of the inner life is the same as control over external conditions. Benito was not able to stay in the flow. He ran out of steam when he started drinking. "Like I always drank, but I started *drinking*. I went from I'm at the party, yeah! Let's have a beer! Let's take a shot! To three months straight haven't killed less than a thirty rack every day, don't have money for sandwiches, but if we all pull together we can get a thirty rack, liquid bread, right?"[30] He was 17 years old. He had already been expelled from high school at the start of his sophomore year for non-attendance; he later independently sat the exam for and received his GED. Then his stepdad had a stroke and that precipitated his alcoholism: "I don't know, it kinda fucked me up in the head, and after watching my mom have all of her dreams come true and then ripped from her bare hands and having a living reminder of it, yelling and screaming at her because he's angry. I was really pissed off, and sad and whatever, and I just sort of drank and drank, literally had beer for breakfast, and then I had beer for lunch, and then I had beer and hard alcohol until I passed out, and that was my lifestyle for a year. It was really fucked up. And then I didn't spin fire so

[30] A thirty rack is a box of thirty cans of beer, usually something cheap like Coors or Budweiser.

good anymore". He described this as losing "the touch"; he was no longer able to channel the magic. He was not living in the flow. As Benito told me this story, I observed that it seemed like a repetitive pattern, one I heard in Thom's stories as well (see chapter seven). It started with going to a new place and everything was going to be great, and then they got low-income entry-level jobs in food service and then they got bored and they got really drunk and then something tragic occurred and that ended up meaning everyone had to leave and this seemed to happen repeatedly in their life histories. It seemed rather than "living their truth" they were living the precarious and limited existence of people with access to few economic and emotional resources.

Ehrenreich argues that the importance placed on positive thinking in America relocates the responsibility for happiness on to the individual and dismisses the role of the state in securing economic prosperity for people by delinking material conditions and personal feelings of wellbeing (2009: 177-194). Much of the positive thinking talk in spirituality has this effect because it suggests that regardless of what is happening in material reality, one can still be 'happy' by controlling inner experience and decreeing it positive. Benito found his material conditions undermined his ability to "be in the flow". Indeed, most of my fire spinner informants would readily admit that although the notion of "the flow" suggested life should be easy and struggle free if following the right path, it often was not. The fault for why they were not able to follow the right path was nearly always attributed to personal failings. The right path was easy; they made their lives difficult by not following it. The directional metaphor of flow was a mystification of the importance of social structural determinants through an emphasis on the importance of individual agency.

Back to the Body

Physical practice makes spirituality visible like a map of the inner spiritual path; it directs the individual toward the flow of the energy of the universe. In fire spinning this externalisation occurs through the body, the interaction of movement with fire and the toy. The agency of this tripartite art object assumes visible form revealing the path,

making visual and tangible something that is by its nature "unrepresentable but very *conceptualizable*" (Gell 1998: 250, emphasis in original). Fire spinning does this more effectively for the performer than the audience; the tensions between the expectations of entertainment from an audience and the importance of fire spinning as spiritual practice led to downgrading the importance of performances by most spinners. Performances were frivolous play; disciplined solo practice was serious, deep play. Giving corporeal form to formless interior experience is an act of representation but more significantly it is an act of transmutation for my informants. Spinning fire was likened to magic. The performer was a magician, with the ability to transform something ordinary into something special, sacred, and valuable. Fire spinning granted the individual an extra-potence like the genius of the artist modelled on the omnipotence of deity, however in spirituality divinity is pantheistic with a gnostic quality. Everyone is a god/dess, however third dimensional reality separates us from this inherent divinity, it needs to be reawakened. This is the purpose of the spiritual path, to lead back to oneness with the universe. Fire spinning is one way my informants found to navigate this path.

The physicality of this practice is crucial to its spiritual elaboration. The body is a better instrument for divining the spiritual path than the mind because it is closer to source; the mind is at the root of separation because it is the creation of third dimensional reality. In higher dimensions, the chattering mind that doubts and questions does not exist. The more the individual follows the flow toward oneness the less they pay attention to the mind and its illusions. The body is the seat of intuition, often described with the American idiom of "gut feeling" but in the cosmology of spirituality located in the heart as the seat of wisdom, following this leads to oneness whereas following the mind leads to further separation. There is then an inversion of the Cartesian dualism in spirituality. The mind-body split predates Descartes, deriving from Roman property law where the mind has "dominion" over the body (Graeber 2011: 207). In spirituality, this primacy is rejected, the mind leads to materialistic, destructive ways of living, the body and its intuition, if cultivated with discipline, leads to spiritual enlightenment and oneness. The mythology of spirituality reverses 'Western' ontology.

It is important that the body is disciplined in spiritual practice; without this discipline it is much harder to distinguish between thoughts heard in the mind and

intuition felt in the body. This is the process of learning to be affected by the energy of the universe. The body is Latour's "folded body", it is a process of learning to discriminate between interior sensations and parse them through reference to the cosmology of spirituality. Sensations and thoughts are put into a structure of "the path" and "being in the flow"; things that are easy or pleasurable are interpreted as "the right way". This is how fire spinning and other physical practices make spirituality visible and real. It also speaks to the importance of the body and the physical in American culture more widely. In America, personhood is corporeal, its power is physical, operating on an individual (as opposed to dividual) level; the power of the fire spinner is seen through their strong, youthful, culturally normative bodies, their agency is corporealised through art. This process of embodiment turns the mythology, a story that religion tells about why it is true, into physical presence. Being in the flow is experienced as physically feeling better through healing traumas of the past and feeling more able to emotionally deal with the present. However, this idea of the flow mystifies the material conditions that continue to constrain and limit the lives of my informants; any limitations experienced are blamed on the self; any transformation remains interior. But there was another limiting factor, as suggested in chapter three, the body was under attack from the environment, polluted by forces far beyond individual reckoning, the extent and power of these forces could only be speculated about in theories.

What Is Wrong With America? Conspiracy Theories as Counter-Narrative

"Everybody knows the war is over, everybody knows the good guys lost, everybody knows the fight is fixed, the poor stay poor, the rich get rich, that's how it goes…everybody knows" - Leonard Cohen*, Everybody Knows,* 1988

The ideas about cancer and its exploitation by 'Big Pharma' for profit related in the chapter three point to a larger narrative in spirituality; they felt that their bodies were under attack from the environment they lived in, an environment controlled by secretive cabals composed of corporations, scientific institutions, and government agencies. The mistrust of these agencies was so extensive that it seemed to constitute an elaborate conspiracy theory. At first, I found this surprising; it seemed a very negative view for people so concerned with positivity to hold. On reflection, however, it seemed as though conspiracy theories formed the obverse of spirituality, the darkness to its light, a theodicy in a system otherwise constructed around a notion of divinity, the universe, geared towards the highest good. The feeling of strangeness that both spirituality and conspiracy theories arouse points to a deeper theoretical issue; these are Americans, people inhabiting a 'Western' discourse based on rationality, why are they using non-rational explanations that express a profound distrust of scientific and political authority? Is it simply that they are marginal people rejecting authority structures they are already excluded from? In this chapter, I examine what the prevalence of conspiracy theories in spirituality tells us about the social construction of knowledge in contemporary American society. What is the relation between the absurd and the accepted? How does the concept of rationality constitute knowledge? What is accepted as authority and why?

Conspiracy theory is a loaded term; it was often deployed by my informants as a boundary marker, "I don't believe in conspiracy theories but…" The term was used to suggest an awareness of how their beliefs may be interpreted while trying to bracket themselves off from this. To call something a conspiracy theory is to take a stance on its rationality. This relates to the genealogy of the term; it was introduced by Karl Popper in the second edition of *The Open Society and its Enemies* as a form of mistaken thinking

(Popper 1966 [1962]: 297; Moore 2016: 3). For Popper, a conspiracy theory was a form of false belief, akin to religious superstition, something that arose specifically in response to secularisation. People could no longer blame God for misfortune so they created vast interlinked conspiracies of evil men tinkering behind the scenes of society causing bad things to happen; complex socio-political causation was mistaken for individual agency. Popper's work was very influential on subsequent interpretations of conspiracy theories by political scientists who use it to describe theories about vast intricate networks of secret plots and concealed instigators behind world events that are motivated by nefarious ambitions for money and power; theories that they are then at pains to declare false (Hofstadter 1965; Goertzel 1994; Byford 2011; Uscinski and Parent 2014; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009; Muirhead and Rosenblum 2016). It is a pejoratively evaluative label, and in calling something a conspiracy theory, an author is taking a position on the veracity of that theory. Moore calls this the "positive" approach to conspiracy theories that views conspiracies as atavistic threats to the proper functioning of liberal democracies that need to be dispelled (Moore 2016: 6).

The other main approach, according to Moore, is the "critical" approach, which is to examine the term 'conspiracy theory' itself and how it goes towards constituting the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge (ibid: 7). This is the approach that anthropologists routinely take, suggesting that conspiracy theories are simply theories wallowing in the shallow end of the power-relations-pool (Pelkmans and Machold 2011; Fassin 2011; West and Sanders 2003; Mathur 2015; Bovensiepen 2016; Butt 2005). In this view, theories are given credibility by whoever has the power to do so, rather than the abundance or lack of evidence in their favour. Anthropologists focus more on what conspiracy theories tell us about society, a concern that cleaves to anthropological work on rumour and "occult cosmologies" (Taussig 1987; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Scheper-Hughes 1993; Kroeger 2003; Dubinsky 2010; Saethre and Stadler 2013; Parrish 2001). This approach suggests, "conspiracy theories are neither true nor false … but are reflections and responses to certain political conditions" (Butt 2005: 414). Following Evans-Pritchard on witchcraft among the Azande, anthropologists try to show how conspiracy theories, like rumours and occult cosmologies, are internally, logically coherent in a relativistic sense (Sanders and West

2003: 13). There is, however, a "lingering functionalism" behind this approach that suggests that conspiracy theories are doing something of social value, specifically for subaltern peoples struggling against subjugating relations of power (Pelkmans and Machold 2011: 68). They are a coded way of 'speaking truth to power'; it is then the manoeuvre of the powerful to dismiss them as 'conspiracy theories'. For this reason, Pelkmans and Machold suggest we should not speak of 'conspiracy theories' but just theories, and approach them cautiously, without supporting or dismissing them (ibid: 77).

In approaching conspiracy theories as simply theories, their similarity to religious beliefs becomes apparent. Both are non-falsifiable claims about social reality that grant agency to causation in a way that challenges assumptions of rationality. Gell argues that the "strangeness" of certain beliefs, in his example that stones can hear the prayers of believers and act upon them, is apparent to the believer as much as the non-believer. It is not that they confuse stones and persons, rather they believe that in certain circumstances stones have "unusual, occult, properties" that only the initiated are aware of (Gell 1998: 123). The key to Gell's argument is that the understanding is granted by initiation; the believer believes himself to have access to knowledge that the unbeliever does not. Dan Sperber's theory of "apparently irrational beliefs" essentially hinges on the same point; people are fundamentally rational and when they believe things that are "apparently irrational" it is rarely because they have taken leave of their senses (1985, 1996). Rather they have arrived at that belief because it comes from someone they have a rational reason to believe; "such beliefs are rationally held, not in virtue of their content, but in virtue of their source" (Sperber 1996: 92). Both perception and communication play a role in the formation of such beliefs, how and by whom and belief is shared and the opinion held of that person. Sperber gives the example of accepting stories as true because they come from the elders in a tribal society, this he calls rational because the source of the story is credible; "reference to elders provides a self-perpetuating authority structure for a story which already has a self-perpetuating transmission structure" (ibid: 96). There are two factors behind accepting apparently irrational beliefs as true; where they come from and the form the story takes. While his

larger argument incorporates a discussion of the role of cognition in this process, the communication side leans heavily on a fairly unexamined notion of authority.

Sperber specifically argues against the relativism inherent in debates concerning the social construction of knowledge, yet his own theory hinges in part on the acceptance of authority. Who is accepted as an authority is socially constructed. Authority in 'Western' societies rests in the scientific paradigm, leading to assumptions that in 'Western' societies people "ought to know better" than to believe conspiracy theories (Sanders and West 2003: 14). The very idea of rationality is part of 'Western' cultural production, a package of ideas and norms that support white colonialist supremacy. The other side of conspiracy is therefore transparency, according to Sanders and West; the ideal 'Western' societies are transparent and rational and have no place for conspiracy. Taussig's work on the history of colonialism in Colombia reveals how brutally that 'rationality' was imposed; the reluctance of Amerindians to labour in rubber plantations was met with enslavement, torture, and genocide by the colonial authorities (1987). Yet this was all justified; raw materials could be exploited for profit, this required labour, the closest and easiest available was the Amerindians, therefore in the logic of colonial economics, it was rational to force them to work. This concept of rationality comes from the tradition that defines it as "the application of logic, of pure thought untempered by emotions" which then forms of the basis of scientific inquiry (Graeber 2015b: 167). However, Graeber goes on to argue that such thought is simply not possible, the assertion of rationality then becomes a political position, it is a way of saying whoever disagrees is clearly insane. There is a clear parallel here with asserting that something is a conspiracy theory; it is aligning that claim with irrationality, and then dismissing it. This manoeuvre has been used repeatedly throughout history to justify the violent expropriation of land and human bodies by white colonial powers, the most recent and currently most powerful example of which is the United State of America.

What does it mean, then, when my informants, situated deep in the heartlands of the USA, start espousing ideas that they themselves understand can be dismissed as irrational conspiracy theories? I suggest that they are pushing back against the notion of rationality dominant in their society and the authority structures that support this notion.

They are elevating their "heart wisdom" over "head logic" because logic and rationality are implicated in the abuses of the "old paradigm". In doing this, they are not descending into madness but renegotiating what is taken as authority. That this should come from a group of people embedded in an esoteric religious form is not so surprising when considering the role of esotericism in the historical production of what is constituted as legitimate knowledge. In his history of the emergence of probability in the 1660s, Hacking relates how knowledge became a matter of the evidence of things rather than the acceptance of ancient authorities or witness testimony (2006: 32). The evidence of things came from reading the signs of nature, a process that emerged through the 'low sciences' of alchemy, geology, astrology, and especially medicine. The emergence of what is now considered empirical natural science from what is now derided as 'the occult' is well attested by historians (Yates 1964; Faivre 1994; von Stuckrad 2005; Hanegraaff 2012; Asprem 2014). The latter was gradually pruned from the tree of knowledge to become the stigmatised debris. In the process, what is considered objective, rational, and therefore legitimate knowledge was constituted.

Spirituality is a context where 'the occult's' existence is already accepted; invisible forces are at work in reality according to my informants, some are benign and some are malevolent, and as with conspiracy theories, everything is connected. Their 'conspiracy theories' evoked a feeling that the world did not work in their favour, expressing a helplessness to control the conditions of their lives. The larger structures of society, such as the government, the media, and mainstream science, were generally seen as hostile. In this chapter I argue that their theories and beliefs constitute a counter-narrative that stands in a dialectical relationship with the 'mainstream' narrative of American society; a counter-narrative that continues the long historical relationship between 'the occult' and 'science', between stigmatised knowledge and legitimate knowledge, between irrationality and rationality. These binaries are mutually dependent and constituted through the dialectical relationship of narrative and counter-narrative that creates a socially constructed space for what is knowable, thinkable, and sayable. What constitutes knowledge in the 'mainstream' narrative is denied by my informants, often for the reason that it is part of this narrative, and they are more likely to hold positions that are contrary to this knowledge. Spirituality and conspiracy theory thus

form part of a counter-narrative, one which is part of a longer historical trajectory in the US that views whoever holds power with suspicion.

Everything Is Not As It Seems: The Counter-Narrative of Conspiracies

At the end of a gruelling kung fu session, I said I felt spacey, that sometimes all the meditation made me floaty. Roger agreed, he said he felt the same, it was probably because "they were spraying a lot this morning". I asked if he meant chemtrails and he said yes. Then he pointed to the sky and said the long lines of cirrus cloud crisscrossing the sky were chemtrails. I had never heard of chemtrails before, but in Sedona they were accepted as everyday knowledge. Chemtrails were said to be the result of spraying aerosols into the atmosphere, usually claimed to be made up of microfibers or "nanofibers" consisting of aluminium, barium, magnesium, strontium, and other elements. These concoctions are sprayed into the air from canisters in the wings of commercial and military aircraft or as additives in jet fuel. They appear as thick streams

Chemtrails on a clear day above Valle

of white cloud across the sky. The government is responsible, possibly with the collusion of Monsanto or other corporations, various benevolent or nefarious reasons are attributed, and usually the claimed effect is to alter the climate. However, even when benevolent reasons are attributed, there are damaging side effects to human health, for example it was said to cause "chemtrail flu", a flu-like sickness with the symptoms of fatigue and upper respiratory illness without fever. Chemtrails, or "aerial spraying" as it is also called, are also linked to cancers, Alzheimer's disease, heavy metal poisoning, autism, and it is said to "toxify" the soil and plants making it impossible to grow food without purchasing Monsanto-patented, aluminium-resistant, genetically modified seeds. The practice is called "geoengineering", and what they mean by this is climate engineering that is happening without the consent of the people.

Sceptics say the trails they are pointing to are harmless, ordinary contrails, caused by condensation from jet engines at high altitudes. However, my informants claimed they lasted longer and looked different to contrails, they spread out over a greater area, which ordinary contrails did not. Once on the top of Bell Rock, Peter

Chemtrails or contrails? The cross of trails in the centre is not expanding, which suggests they are contrails. Whereas the trails to the right are expanding, suggesting chemtrails.

pointed to a series of chemtrails that looked like a double helix in the sky above. He called it "aerial spraying" so as to avoid arguments about contrails vs. chemtrails. There were many aircraft trails in the sky that day, I pointed to a plane and asked if that was a contrail and the wider plume hanging in the air beside it was a chemtrail and Peter confirmed they were. So there was a visual difference claimed to be discernible between contrails and chemtrails. This theory is not limited to Sedona. There is a huge amount of speculation and accusation on the internet about chemtrails. Two documentaries on YouTube were often referred to me when asking about this belief, *What In The World Are They Spraying?* And the sequel, *Why In The World Are They Spraying?* Both have over a million views. There are numerous internet sites dedicated to uncovering the 'truth'. There is so much speculation surrounding this issue that governments and scientific organisations have been forced to respond and declare chemtrails fictitious[31].

I met Bobby at the Sedona branch of Unity church, a New Thought aligned non-denominational nationwide religious organisation. He had only recently moved to Sedona and was living in a tent on Forest Service land. He had grown up on a self-sustaining farm in Kansas, and now worked as a landscaper, psychic, and shaman. Previously he trained as a radiographer, but stopped because he felt the medical industry was run by pharmaceutical and insurance companies and was aimed at making money rather than helping people. He told me he believed chemtrails were real and were polluting the soil with fire accelerants, which were increasing the number and intensity of forest fires; the other purposes were weather control and mind control. He claimed all soil was polluted and toxic because it contained aluminium, barium, and magnesium from spraying, even organic farms were contaminated but less so. This meant everyone had toxins and parasites contaminating their bodies, he told me a biannual cleanse was necessary to combat it. He blamed the government for chemtrails, and said they wanted to keep the truth from us. The aim was always making money, just as the medical industry did not want to cure cancer, it wanted to make money off it by selling expensive chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatments. The government was using

[31] "Contrails Factsheet" released by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 2000; Fraser 2009; "Contrail Facts" released by the US Air Force; Canadian government response http://holmestead.ca/chemtrails/response-en.html; UK government response https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/vo051108/text/51108w11.htm

chemtrails to pollute the soil to prevent us growing our own healthy food. With sufficient nutrients from food, the body could heal itself, even from terminal illness, without it we were dependent on expensive drugs and supplements from the pharmaceutical industry.

While the acceptance of chemtrails was commonplace, not everyone saw such negative motivations behind them. Amateo Ra was a trance channeller and conscious entrepreneur, who had developed his ability to receive messages from other dimensions while working as a court stenographer. When I met him in Sedona, he was running the Ascension Academy with a partner, which was a "Magical Mystery School", aimed at helping people with their spiritual evolution. I attended an event of theirs at the Hampton Inn, during which Amateo channelled his higher self from Sirius from the future. Among other messages, it was claimed that chemtrails were being sprayed as a preventative measure from "solar systemic space weather influence". The government was afraid of this influence and was trying to decrease global warming by reflecting the sun with the aluminium in the chemtrails. However, this whole process was the reflection of our own desire to block out things in our consciousness, which resulted in becoming toxic. So even though the chemtrails were sprayed out of good intentions, the impact was negative. There was no separation between the government and the people, however, because these are all part of the same thing, oneness, which Amateo called the "singularity". It was a sign of our lack of spiritual evolution, chemtrails were a physical substantiation of this attempt to try to block things out and remain separate, when instead we should let everything in and embrace the oneness. Chemtrails were thus part of the illusion of the 3D reality that there was separation, and the way to overcome them was to evolve spiritually ourselves, because we were the same as the government and the chemtrails were really part of us. Amateo thus offered an explanatory model for chemtrails that assimilated them into the cosmology of spirituality. His explanation defused the negative aspects by reinforcing the principle of oneness.

Chemtrails were not only discussed in conversation and at events, they were the frequent subject of Facebook status updates. Jill lived in her camp trailer parked in the driveway of a friend of mine, she taught reiki and nia (a dance style combined with martial arts), and performed a version of the Nutcracker using LED circus toys rather

than ballet. Soon after this show, she announced on Facebook that she was leaving Sedona, after a sojourn of some three months. She declared she was returning to Minnesota, where her family lived, because the chemtrails in Sedona were blocking her spiritual evolution[32]. Jill went on to comment on this post saying there were more chemtrails over Sedona because "they" were trying to block the spiritual energy of the place. Since the airport in Sedona was not a "real" airport there should not be any commercial planes flying over[33]. She then posted pictures of the chemtrails, as did another commenter. Other comments circulated about using the power of thought to clean the skies and getting educated on the government's attempts to poison us.

Jill then posted a link to an article about chemtrails, claiming she knew they were real because she had previously worked in aerospace engineering. The article cited high levels of aluminium and barium in Phoenix and linked them to aerial spraying. The report was unsourced and contained data on high levels of certain metals in the atmosphere then claimed these were the elements common in chemtrails. There was no evidence to support this connection presented nor were any alternative sources for the elements considered. It was a fairly typical report on chemtrails compared to others I have read on the internet and had emailed to me by informants. They generally included unsubstantiated claims, large tables of data without citing methodology for how that data was collected, followed by conclusions that this must be the result of aerial spraying. They lacked methodological rigour and were not published in peer-reviewed journals. They constituted their own genre of amateur scientific research yet they were held to be authoritative based on their conclusions rather than their methods. What was different from Amateo's explanation which assimilated chemtrails into the cosmology of spirituality was that Jill's relied on her authority as someone with knowledge of science backed up with evidence in the form of scientific papers. Jill felt that science and spirituality confirmed each other, and as someone with knowledge of both she could

[32] An alternative explanation that was rumoured by performers in her show was that she did not have any money left, and had no choice but to return to her parents' home in Minnesota.
[33] Sedona has a small private airport, which is itself subject to conspiracy theories that pilots dump jet fuel in order to take off because the runway is too short, a petition was circulated online against this https://www.change.org/p/stop-jet-fuel-dumping-save-the-sedona-sanctuary Sedona is however in the flight path between Phoenix and Las Vegas, and Phoenix and Flagstaff, as well as other cities to the northwest. Due to the prevalence of domestic air travel, there are few areas in the continental US which are not subject to overhead air traffic.

stand as an authority. Her interpretation reinforced that chemtrails were damaging, as Bobby's did, unlike Amateo, she did not impute a positive intention behind them.

Each of these theories about chemtrails was founded on a different source of authority; personal experience in industry, amateur scientific reports, and direct revelation from a non-human source. Explanatory models were improvisational and what constituted knowledge and evidence varied. Interestingly, no one told me they had read official reports by the EPA or US Air Force and therefore considered chemtrails false. When greeted with scepticism, they would advocate testing the air personally on a day with lots of spraying, to see first-hand the levels of chemicals. This is also what is done in YouTube documentaries like *What In The World Are They Spraying?* In which they get a small child with a mason jar to collect a sample to show that the levels of aluminium can be found that easily. This recourse to amateur research, direct revelation, and personal testimony is how conspiracy theories construct a counter-narrative about the world. It is a way of describing what is going on and why in opposition to officially sanctioned authorities, such as government agencies or tenured scientists. In spirituality, this counter-narrative focuses in particular on the environment, technology, and health, what Quill calls "technological conspiracy" where scientific and technical elites are portrayed as using their skill sets to undermine and exploit the rest of society (2016: 92). It is a discourse that questions and attacks the authority of those elites while simultaneously employing the methods and techniques on which those elites base their authority.

In terms of chemtrails, the counter-narrative expresses fears of being poisoned by vaguely defined 'toxins' that are also reflected in concerns about food related in chapter three. These 'toxins' represent an attack on the body. The most commonly cited 'toxin' is aluminium, often incorrectly identified as a heavy metal, which functions as the smoking gun of chemtrails. Aluminium is a naturally occurring element in soil, it is very easy to get samples contaminated with aluminium, but it can be harmful in high concentrations. Its prevalence and harmfulness are conflated in the chemtrail discourse as proof of unnatural additives in the air and soil that cause health problems. This created a lot of anxiety among my informants because it could not be avoided, unlike certain foods. The only way to combat it was to eat certain supplements, for example

chlorella (a type of algae), perform regular cleanses, or think positively so as to manifest good health despite the pollution. This anxiety expresses a truth; the average person is unable to control their environment, particularly in terms of what is in the air and water. Aeroplanes do spray harmful gases into the atmosphere, principally CO_2; jet fuel is a pollutant, a leading cause of anthropogenic climate change. Chemtrails could be read as a commentary on what is happening to the environment, one in which climate change becomes a purposeful attack on the people, the irony being that although what they point to are trails of harmless water vapour there are high concentrations of CO_2 emissions invisible in the atmosphere. The attack on the body of citizens by fossil fuel emissions sanctioned, promoted, and even subsidised by the state is quite real[34].

What is occurring in chemtrail theories is perhaps less 'irrational' and more "rational in excess" (Fassin 2011: 42). As Fassin suggests about conspiracy theories concerning the spread of AIDS in South Africa, they address directly the enormous power that state-sponsored science and medicine have over the bodies of citizens, particularly poor and marginal groups. Conspiracy theories extend the truth of these power relations over the limits of what is accepted and fall into the realm of the absurd. It is reported in mainstream news media that geoengineering to combat climate change is suggested by some scientists as possible but it is not frequently tested because of concerns about long-term effects to the environment and human health[35]. In chemtrail theories, geoengineering to alter the climate is already happening; reports by scientists proposing potential tests are read as proof that this is what is being done[36]. What this suggests is a fear that people have no control over corporate and government use of the earth, which affects their health.

These concerns stem from a particular distrust of the US military. Chemtrail fears started in the mid-1990s, with the publication of an Air Force report describing fictional representations of future scenarios including one in which the weather was

[34] https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/may/18/fossil-fuel-companies-getting-10m-a-minute-in-subsidies-says-imf ; https://www.iisd.org/gsi/fossil-fuel-subsidies

[35] From the BBC: "Geo-engineering: climate fixes 'could harm billions'" http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-30197085 ; "Geoengineering plan could have 'unintended' side effect" http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-25639343

[36] For instance, an Aurora Flight Sciences report from the University of Calgary published in 2011 of a cost-benefit analysis of geoengineering was linked by worldtruth.tv as confirming chemtrails were real, see http://worldtruth.tv/chemtrail-whistleblower-speaks/

weaponised by 2025 (House 1996). The advanced technology and lack of oversight in the US military feeds into conspiracy theories. The 2025 report is often linked on chemtrail sites as evidence that chemtrails are real and caused by the military's weather control schemes. This is supported by historical cases when the US military did spray harmful chemicals on unsuspecting populations and even their own forces, for example the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam[37]. Government, military, and corporations are linked in fears about the 'military-industrial complex', the aims of which are felt to support elites at the expense of the masses. This is pointed to as reason to doubt the official narrative; the past misdeeds of the military and the government add credence to the counter-narrative.

Theories about chemtrails joined with related suspicions about the harmful effects of fluoride and vaccinations to form a counter-narrative to authorised explanations of scientific progress, health provision, and environmental change. It is a systematic contradiction of official explanations, homogenising such explanations to a 'them' evilly manipulating and colluding against 'us'. The counter-narrative is a collection of linked theories, some of which posit specific conspirators, others that merely cast aspersions about the power structures in American society. The overall effect is the suggestion that what appears is not what is; there are invisible forces at work. Reality, especially as depicted in the mainstream media, is illusory because it is being consciously manipulated by those who hold power for their own gain. Empirical facts cannot be relied on because these are presented by contingent actors who have motive and bias, who want something, usually money and power. The recurrent question posed is *cui bono*? Who benefits from the way things are being presented? There is a long history of anti-government and anti-elite sentiment dating back to colonial times that feeds into the counter-narrative; a general feeling that whoever holds power should be regarded with suspicion (Goldberg 2001: ix; Fenster 2008 [1999]: 9). Conspiracy theories are part of this long history of American populism, indeed the Constitution itself includes conspiracy theories about King George III (Uscinski and Parent 2014: 2).

[37] "Agent Orange's Long Legacy, for Vietnam and Veterans,"
https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/12/us/agent-oranges-long-legacy-for-vietnam-and-veterans.html?_r=0

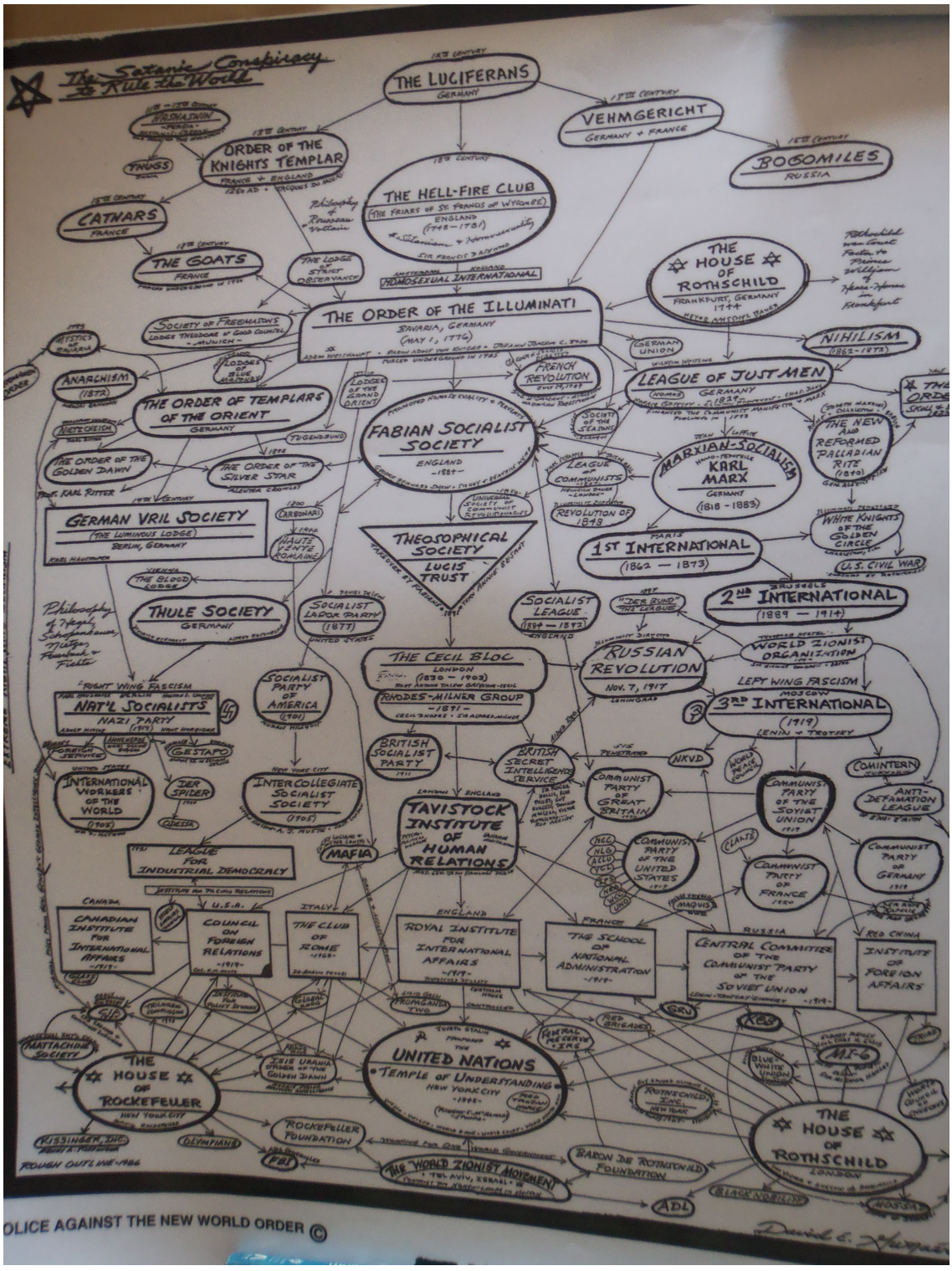
The existence of elites has been regarded with suspicion in the US since the founding of the nation.

Power and its Discontents: The Dark Cabal

In order for there to be a conspiracy, there need to be conspirators (Byford 2011: 71). The clearest personification of the malevolent force behind the counter-narrative was the "dark cabal". Dennis, a musician and businessman, described the dark cabal as "Reptilian", the name for the evil aliens popularised by David Icke (Barkun 2003: 98-108; Robertson 2013). The dark cabal is a group of around fourteen families, including the British Royal Family and the Rothschilds, who control all the finance and banking in the world. Dennis claimed the freemasonry pyramid on American currency is evidence of their existence, which he described as "not a secret". They are open about what they are doing, which is keeping the majority in servitude. These families inbreed and control bloodlines so as to remain pure; they are the 1%. This guarantees their children will continue their control of resources. Dennis advised me that they were not "evil", however, they were just a part of the experience we have created and since we create reality with our thoughts and actions, we could get rid of them any time we want. Other entities in the universe find it ridiculous that we pay to live on our own planet. We could end it very easily, by not paying tax, paying off debts, or paying rents, and the financial system would quickly collapse. We consent to our servitude, and this has to change or the world will not continue. Some people think the solution is in building bunkers and stockpiling resources, they think they can live on planet without seven billion others, but Dennis called this "playing into fear". He aimed to work to help build the community and support between people instead. For him this was the link between conspiracy theories and spirituality; spirituality offered the solution to the problems conspiracy theories diagnosed.

It was, however, one label among many. In Sedona, there were a number of different terms used, I would sometimes hear talk of the Illuminati, the New World Order, or to combine the two, the Illuminati controlled NWO (Sanders and West 2003:

Diagram of the New World Order



2-6; Goldberg 2001: 22-65). The first person I stayed with in Sedona, Vixen du Lac, gave me a complicated diagram of the New World Order showing the many intricate

connections between groups and events in recent history. This idea of everything being connected resulted most often in an amorphous, unpersonified 'them' or 'the system' as the ones behind everything. Often it was simply 'the government' that was at fault. There were so many different aspects that to single out any one group seemed pointless. It was a "group-personality" of conspirators (Byford 2011: 72). The aim of this byzantine collective is to gain power, sometimes termed as setting up a New World Order, where they have total control of the economy, remove individual freedoms, and commit genocide of certain populations. They are effectively playing God, or perhaps more accurately, the Devil. Ideas about the dark cabal operate as a theodicy in spirituality, explaining the origin of evil in a universe that is fundamentally good (Robertson 2015). While referring to them as 'the government' or 'the system' may seem to refer to an earthly evil, these were manifestations of third dimensional reality. Evil exists because we are still in the third dimension, and whether it is called the dark cabal, the government, the system, Reptilians, or the NWO, the end result is still the same, things are not as they seem, and the way to 'truth' is through spiritual development of the individual.

There is an important social class dynamic to these framings because the dark cabal is the elite. Whether they referred to wealthy powerful families in finance or politics, such as the Rothschilds, the Rockefellers, or the Bush family, or to corporations, such as Standard Oil, BP, or Monsanto, or to vague conglomerations such as 'Big Pharma' or the 'military-industrial complex', what my informants meant was the groups who had power. These groups were perceived as not caring about the average person. They wanted to control everything, and in particular they wanted to make people dependent on their products to increase profits, for example genetically modified aluminium-resistant seeds were said to be the only ones that would still grow in the soil after aerial spraying. This can be seen as a way of describing the inequality of American society in a way that vilifies it and holds specific people responsible. The powerful American families and corporations are made the cartoonish bad guys behind complex political-economic problems, with influence and resources that vastly overwhelm ordinary citizens. This shifts the emphasis away from collective political action to individual spiritual action. Dennis was rare in proposing direct political action to oppose

the dark cabal, most of my informants said only a shift in consciousness, ascension to a higher dimension, could solve the problems brought about by their machinations. The existence of social inequality is part of living in the third dimension; overcoming it is a matter of spiritual evolution.

Not everyone in Sedona eschewed political action completely, however. Anne was 70 and a self-described activist. At the time we spoke, her latest campaign was against the installation of smart meters, which she said were part of an electromagnetic grid used for mind control by the government. This mind control was used to make James Holmes, the mass shooter in the cinema in Aurora, Colorado, snap and go on a rampage in 2012[38]. The government also controlled food, through genetic modification, and communications, through monitoring calls and emails, and the weather, through chemtrails. The plan was to control people through technology; a belief which places Anne's fears in the realm of "technological conspiracies" outlined above (Quill 2016). To prevent the installation of smart meters, which read the electricity meter automatically and send the reading back to Arizona Public Service Electricity Company (APS) electronically, she was campaigning in local council meetings to have them banned, launching petitions which she lodged with APS directly, and spreading information so people knew they could opt out of the proposed installation programme.

Anne had also actively campaigned against the streetlights, which were installed along the central highway bisecting Sedona, the 89A. By the time I spoke to her, the 106 lamps were already set to be installed. She attributed this failure to the fact that Sedona politics was corrupted by cronyism and corporatism. There was a group called the Sedona 30, she told me, people who have been in Sedona over 30 years, 57 of them in total, who are the local power brokers, predominantly businessmen and property owners. They got rid of the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) offer of ceding the 89A to the city council along with $16 million and instead kept the highway in state control and ensured the streetlights were installed. They did this through illegally sending it to a ballot and turning people against the deal. It was an administrative measure not a legislative one so it should never have been sent to the ballot, in Anne's opinion. But the City Attorney was corrupt and no one "calls him on his shit". Through

[38] http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/21/us/shooting-at-colorado-theater-showing-batman-movie.html

this collusion, vested interests in Sedona got the streetlights installed against the wishes of the majority of residents. Anne accused the Sedona 30 of wanting to turn Sedona into the Las Vegas strip.

The Sedona 30 is a real group of people who have been in Sedona over 30 years. It was founded in 1982 with the purpose of working towards the "betterment of the Sedona community"[39]. They call themselves community leaders, and are the kind of old white men found in positions of power throughout America. Anne was pointing to local power structures and how they work in favour of the older, wealthier residents of Sedona, and against the interests of the spiritual community, who were generally younger, had been there for less time, and had less economic leverage. Angela Lefevre, who unsuccessfully ran for Congress in Northern Arizona in 2012 for the Democrats and subsequently was elected to the Sedona City Council, told me that the main concern of the local council and other community leaders was to preserve Sedona the way it was, limiting development while still attracting tourists, which were seen as a necessary evil for the economy. She said the spiritual community was seen as "fringe" and their opinions were not normally solicited on local matters. The streetlights and smart meters were both controversial local issues in Sedona for the people I knew involved in spirituality. Most of my informants that I asked about it were opposed to the installation of the streetlights on the grounds of aesthetics and light pollution; although once they were actually installed many said they were not as ugly as they had feared. Smart meters continue to be an issue in Sedona, with many claiming they have adverse health effects. With the APS rollout of installation commencing, people are able to opt-out if they want, for a monthly $5 charge and $50 fee[40].

These Sedona conspiracy theories indicate that the counter-narrative can be found on the local level as well as large scale overarching plots about government and corporations. Small town politics fuel conspiracy theories as much as the oblique workings of the federal government. Anne was one of the few involved in spirituality who took an active role in campaigning against issues she cared about on a local level. It

[39] This quote was originally taken from the Sedona 30 website, www.sedona30.com, which has since been taken down. See http://www.sedona.biz/news-from-sedona/sedona-30-launches-website/
[40] http://www.azcentral.com/story/money/business/2014/12/12/state-settles-smart-meter-debate/20343257/

is telling that her efforts were nearly always unsuccessful, as with the streetlights, or only partially successful, as with the smart meters. There is a powerlessness of the individual who lacks political or economic position in large complex societies, even at the local level. This powerlessness often finds fruitful expression in the counter-narrative of conspiracy theories that alleges that everything those in power do is corrupt, self-serving, and dangerous. This highlights the social class dimension of conspiracies; the working class suspect that the middle class and upper class always conspire, having meetings they are not invited to about things not to their benefit. In Sedona, the spiritual community were not respected or included in politics or public life, as a group they can be seen as a 'lower class' even if individuals on a spiritual path could be wealthy (although this too was very rare). Their social and political exclusion spurs the counter-narrative; they look to other sources of authority and knowledge. Sennett argues that people in power are assumed to have "higher knowledge" that justifies and legitimises what they do, which he calls a mystification (Cobb and Sennett 1972: 159). The marginalisation of the spiritual community encouraged them to doubt the higher knowledge of those in power, especially when coupled with their own framework for receiving knowledge from alternative media, amateur research and the internet, and divine revelation, which they tested against their own intuition, or "heart wisdom". They did not believe in the mystifications of the powerful that granted them authority; their authority came from within the individual.

Who Do You Believe?

There were many theories in Sedona about how the government was harming its citizens; what I rarely heard was a committed affirmation that they would never do such a thing. Cynicism of the intentions of the government seems to be characteristic of my informants involved in spirituality, with corporations, the media, and science also coming under sceptical view. This characteristic seems to be common among Americans who feel marginalised based on their race, income level, or political affiliations (Quill 2016; Harding and Stewart 2003; Hellinger 2003; McCarthy Brown 2003; Ward and

Voas 2011). It was not necessary for a person to believe in the dark cabal to be doubtful about what 'they' were 'really' doing. Among my informants, believing official accounts was often taken as a sign of gullibility. You believed 'the man', which meant you were duped by the system, one of the 'sheeple' who were still 'asleep'. The internet played a significant role as a forum for the discussion of different viewpoints and dissemination of theories. Websites such as worldtruth.tv and naturalnews.com were trusted more than established scientific journals or the 'mainstream' media. The internet is often seen as freer and more democratic than traditional information services (Aupers 2012: 27; Quill 2016: 89; Fenster 2008 [1999]: 1). Watching YouTube videos was a major source of information for my informants, and to a lesser extent talk radio and internet radio shows, such as Alex Jones' *Coast to Coast* (Robertson 2016). Such outlets call themselves the 'alternative' media and claim to reveal the truth, which they can do because unlike the traditional or 'mainstream' media they are not controlled by vested interests. As mentioned earlier, many of the videos and articles from such websites were shared widely on Facebook or found via Google searches, which were seen as impartial listings of information. However, as was widely reported after the 2016 election, the algorithms of search engines and social media are skewed to produce results based on users' previous preferences. This creates an 'echo chamber' effect where results are reinforced by user biases. In the aftermath of the election, this came under scrutiny as it was reported that 'fake news' articles slandering in particular Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton were being shared widely because they agreed with users' prior opinions[41].

The two most shared websites by my informants on Facebook during my time in the field were worldtruth.tv and naturalnews.com. They are fairly representative of the massive proliferation of alternative media sites that infest the internet; they both publish articles that could be deemed 'fake news' or conspiracy theories. Both have around a million likes on Facebook and claim a global audience. The articles are mostly posted by the founder on worldtruth.tv, whereas naturalnews.com has a small group of regular

[41] https://www.aclu.org/blog/free-future/fixing-fake-news ; https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/dec/18/what-is-fake-news-pizzagate ; http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-38168792

contributors, the most prolific again being the founder[42]. Articles on these sites make bold claims to reveal the "100% undeniable truth" on issues, but then are poorly sourced and referenced if at all, referencing sources that do not support the claim made or other conspiracy theory websites with the same claims. Interestingly, they frequently refer to authorities on issues, for example well-known whistle-blowers such as Edward Snowden, unnamed officials at the UN, non-US government ministers, or medical doctors or scientists who have turned against the mainstream. They are using the same types of authority figures to produce the counter-narrative as are used in the traditional media – politicians, scientists, and doctors. The counter-narrative is still based on the same sources for truth-claims; insiders, people with position, power, training, prestige. However, they are trusted because crucially they have turned against the mainstream.

The evidence presented is claimed to be empirical, in that it is based on observations, for example an oft-made claim is that anyone can see the chemtrails in the sky. This layman's approach to perceiving reality is coupled with suggestions of scientific tests, for example naturalnews.com claims to have its own mass spectrometry instrument to performs tests in the public interest, although complete data sets and methodology are not included with the assertion of what has been tested with this device. They are using the scientific method, or some version of it, to combat the mainstream narrative issued from scientific authorities, corporations, and government. Rather than eschewing science, they are using its methods to get to the truth, which is obscured by deceit of the traditional media and scientific institutions rather than a failure of the scientific method itself. Another favourite tactic is to take studies that have been done and extrapolate the results to make them seem more wide-ranging than the original study intended[43]. Such websites are not using faith-based statements to argue against science; although they are called quacks they in turn call mainstream science

[42] Interestingly, in response to 'fake news' criticisms, Google de-indexed Natural News, so it no longer shows up in search results. Natural News responded with claims that this was a "conspiracy" against them, see https://www.telapost.com/natural-news-google-penalty/

[43] For example, a frequent post by my informants is articles claiming that 75% of doctors would refuse chemotherapy themselves, it is used to claim that chemotherapy is ineffective and only offered to the masses to make money for 'Big Pharma', see http://www.naturalnews.com/036054_chemotherapy_physicians_toxicity.html ; and the rebuttal https://anaximperator.wordpress.com/2010/05/06/do-75-of-doctors-refuse-chemotherapy-on-themselves/

quackery[44]. What is interesting about this is how it is not the method of science that lacks legitimacy in the counter-narrative; it is the mouthpieces.

Science therefore has legitimacy in spirituality; indeed it is a widely attested feature of spirituality that it uses scientific theories, especially quantum physics, as the basis for religious elaboration (Asprem 2016; Hammer 2004: 201-330). As mentioned above with Jill, personal knowledge of and professional experience in science was not necessarily felt to be incompatible with spirituality. Indeed, Jill was not alone among my informants in suggesting that scientific discoveries 'proved' the claims of spirituality. Hammer calls this "scientism", which he argues is the mistaken interpretation of scientific theory used for religious purposes (ibid: 206). It is constructed explicitly in opposition to 'mainstream' science; only those with spiritual insight can truly understand what science reveals because they are not bound by limiting, materialist determinism. By understanding spirituality and combining it with science, they could reveal the 'truth'. This strategy is reproduced in the counter-narrative; using the same methodology as scientists, websites like worldtruth.tv and naturalnews.com can reveal more because they are not bound by the 'cover-up' to which all mainstream authorities are committed.

This is a feature of conspiracy theories generally, according to Byford; it is a rhetorical strategy to use a "quasi-academic style" as a way of distracting from the gaps in their own argument (2011: 89). Similarly, Uscinski and Parent point to the use of errant data and unfalsifiable claims as markers of a conspiracy theory as opposed to a credible theory (Uscinski and Parent 2014: 50). But what is a theory here? Data is only errant if one particular account is accepted, the data that do not fit into that account become "errant", however theories gain their credibility from power and social status (Pelkmans and Machold 2011: 69). These authors mainly address political conspiracy theories, and an important caveat is that it is much harder to falsify political conspiracies than scientific conspiracy theories; chemtrails and anti-vaccination theories are easy to discredit. The two feed into each other, however, because distrusting politically sanctioned authorities affects the credibility of medical and scientific authorities. The

[44] For example http://www.naturalnews.com/048063_flu_vaccines_junk_science_zealotry.html where it claims that "vaccines are a religion"

problem is not lack of information or education; it is scepticism about the authorities providing this information. In the counter-narrative, there are no impartial observers, everyone has a position, and the one to believe is the one that confirms what is already believed. Definitions of conspiracy theories as false and separate from proper investigations into (often political) conspiracies hinge upon how much "properly constituted epistemic authorities" are believed (Uscinski and Parent 2014: 33). If they are, then Watergate can be sanctioned because the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and Congress have investigated it and found it true and that is accepted, whereas chemtrails are not because the EPA and other scientific and aviation authorities say they are not. However if properly constituted epistemic authorities are not accepted, then any number of conspiracy theories can be entertained and believed. The line between theory and conspiracy theory is blurred when social institutions are not given credibility.

The issue is who is considered as an authority and it goes directly to the processes through which knowledge is socially constructed. In Sperber's "naturalist approach" to "apparently irrational beliefs" he takes it as rational to believe propositions when the source is a credible authority (Sperber 1996: 96). In his field-site in Ethiopia among the Dorze, this meant the tribal elders. The US is a very different kind of society, and what the recent fake news debate has highlighted is the extent to which there is no single accepted source of authority for Americans. Conspiracy theories about Hillary Clinton proliferated because those opposed to her politically portrayed her as criminal. This came to a head in the pizzagate conspiracy theory which alleged Clinton and her campaign manager were running a child sex ring in the basement of a Washington D.C. pizzeria; a pizzeria which in reality did not even have a basement. The rumours were circulated based on leaked emails which mentioned pizza frequently, and resulted in a man opening fire in the pizzeria because he wanted to "self-investigate" them (Gusterson 2017). Denials of this conspiracy theory in the media and by the politicians implicated have not abated it. Articles and videos shared on the internet are given more credence because politicians and the mainstream media are viewed as liars. Indeed, the term 'fake news' has been adopted by the newly elected President Donald Trump to dismiss any reports that go against him. It is now being used in a similar way to how 'conspiracy theory' itself is used; as a way of undermining and dismissing dissent. What

this suggests is the fractured nature of authority in American society, one that has serious implications for a consensus agreement on what is valid knowledge, what is 'true', even what constitutes 'reality'.

The truth is a political issue in the counter-narrative. Official denials are dismissed and taken as evidence of a cover-up. It becomes impossible to deny the assertions made in the counter-narrative because denial is inverted; disconfirmation becomes confirmation. It is easy to see the counter-narrative as simply wrong, and if they knew good science and critical thinking they would know better. However, the counter-narrative is more a response to the nature of authority in the US. Authority is inextricably linked to power; having authority is having the power to decide, define, order, influence, to make things happen. The strong vein of individualism in the US claims authority is properly the right of the individual citizen; larger structures, especially the federal government, have been treated with suspicion since the inception of the nation because they are seen as infringing on individual rights (Uscinski and Parent 2014: 2-4). In spirituality, this is given a religious rendering, only they have authority to decide legitimate knowledge because the individual creates their own reality. My informants used the alternative media in conjunction with intuition to decide which theories they found credible. They would read something and if it seemed right to them, often put in terms of 'feeling' it was right, then it would be accepted. This followed the practice in spirituality of putting feelings, or heart wisdom, above logic, or head knowledge. In the cosmology of spirituality, head knowledge relates to 'mind', which is third dimensional thinking and as such to be treated with suspicion. Heart wisdom relates to intuition which is closer to source or spirit; listening to intuition is a way of aligning with the energy of the universe. Arguments based on logic were therefore treated with scepticism, especially if they went against a person's intuition. The cosmology of spirituality demoted logic, and consequently rationality, as inferior to the 'higher knowledge' that could be gained through aligning oneself with the energy of the universe. Logic and rationality were third dimensional; they supported the materialist 'old paradigm' way of thinking and acting that put money and profits before people. Spirituality contained a radical rejection of 'Western' discourse, for similar reasons as found in the theories of Taussig and Graeber outlined in the introduction. If

logic dictated the world should be the way it is, if it was rational to accumulate profits through poisoning the environment and endangering the health of the people, then logic and rationality were part of the problem that spirituality aimed to address.

Conspiracy Theories and Spirituality

Conspiracy theories and spirituality have a shared territory to the extent that the term "conspirituality" has been suggested to theorise this conjunction (Ward and Voas 2011; Asprem and Dyrendal 2015; Aupers 2012: 31; Robertson 2015; Whitesides 2015). In terms of content, both are stigmatised discourses, covering contested topics such as astrology, UFOs, and naturopathic medicine (Barkun 2003: 2). These topics are popularly believed but dismissed by epistemic authorities in society (Byford 2011: 23). This does not mean that they cannot be found meaningful, relevant, or even beneficial by individuals. When the mainstream rejects what they are interested in, they may be prompted to reconsider other rejected issues, creating a domino effect where stigmatised discourses are accepted one after another until one is fully committed to the counter-narrative. However, I found that few of my informants were simply contrarian, accepting things merely because they had been excluded from the mainstream. Both conspiracy theories and spirituality are premised on worldviews that everything is connected, and make a similar use of science to try to prove matters that are ultimately unverifiable (Ward and Voas 2011: 104; Aupers 2012: 30). There is a more direct connection than that though. My informants would often tell me that change to the current system was necessary or the world would not survive. Conspiracy theories provided a narrative about what was wrong with the world, and spirituality was how to fix it. The dark cabal had made the world toxic; they could be defeated by 'detoxifying', which meant changing diet and lifestyle along spiritual lines, such as eating organic food, decreasing stress, and cleansing. The counter-narrative of conspiracy theories suggests that modern life is poisonous on purpose; spirituality is how to be cured of this poison.

The connection between spirituality and conspiracy theories is not obvious, however, and may even seem contradictory. If reality is manifested through thoughts

and words, why does evil exist? Why would anyone think chemtrails into existence? This is where the idea of the dark cabal comes in; there are groups of people so tied to the current 3D reality of greed, materialism, and anger that they create ripples of negativity throughout the dimension. It is then the responsibility of spiritually awakened people to defeat this negativity with positivity. As already mentioned, conspiracy theories offer a theodicy in the cosmology of spirituality, explaining why evil exists (Robertson 2016). A number of the popular conspiracy theories in Sedona were figured to be specifically aimed at impinging spirituality, such as chemtrails and fluoride calcifying the pineal gland. The machinations of the dark cabal were directly targeted at them because spirituality was a threat to its plans for world domination. The more general aims attributed to the dark cabal - depopulation, fear, chaos - increased the overall level of negativity which would lower the dimensional vibration. Raising the vibration through spiritual development could help stop them.

Roger told me that focusing on paranoid conspiracies, as his father did, did not really help anyone. What if all the soldiers just stopped fighting? What if we all stopped paying our taxes? The system would crumble. The way to get there was through raising your own personal awareness and then helping others around you, he told me. Originally from Long Island, he had been to Occupy Wall Street, and saw people being kettled on the Brooklyn Bridge. However, he did not think protests or people who print their own drivers' licenses - so-called "free men on the land" - did any good. Spirituality was the only route to freedom and all he wanted to focus on. We talked about conspiracies, and how it seemed like a few families or groups of people had been in control of people, resources, and power throughout history concealed under different 'nations' and 'empires', but it was really the bankers, those with wealth and power, under different names, sometimes co-operating with each other and sometimes fighting with each other, but always exploiting the people for their own gain. Roger said in the end, we should not get attached to this. The only thing we could do about the system now was to follow our spiritual practice, because then we could make changes on a deep, karmic level. The practice was all we had, and by changing ourselves, we could change the people around us, and then they would change the people around them, and it would spread out as ripples of positive energy.

Spirituality is seen as a new way of living that obviates the power structures of society, through promoting self-governance and self-reliance. The most radical form of this is the "free man on the land" or those living off the grid that try not to depend on utility companies and government services (see chapter seven). Even for those in Sedona who took a more moderate path, naturopathic medicine was a means of not depending on the pharmaceutical and insurance companies for healthcare, homeschooling was a way to educate children outside of mainstream education, buying local and self-employment were ways not to invest in the corporate-controlled economy. Many advocated living in small-scale communities and not paying tax as a way of not funding the perpetual state of war in the US. These were mostly held as ideals however; most people did pay tax because they did not want to get in trouble. Total self-reliance was utopian, however desires for it did express the importance of personal freedom as a goal of the spiritual path.

Where's The Trust?

Why don't Americans trust their government, corporations, media, or the scientific community? Aupers suggests that this is something new; there has been an emergence of a "conspiracy culture" since the 1970s because of the revelation of "real conspiracies" such as Watergate and postmodern "epistemological insecurity" (2012: 24). Whereas Uscinski and Parent point to the presence of conspiracy theories about George III in the Constitution to suggest that they are part of the fabric of American politics (2014: 2-3). There is a longer history of anti-elitism and scepticism of (especially federal government) authority in the US that has flourished in the state of "permanent insecurity of all conditions of life" created by neoliberalism (Heins 2007: 790). Part of this insecurity concerns the status of America itself. America was the best; Americans created the most powerful political, economic, cultural system in the world. It was a superpower. Now that time is nostalgia, found only on country music stations

and amongst the elderly[45]. There is a feeling on both the political left and right that America is "headed for an abyss" (Uscinksi and Parent 2014: 13). American exceptionalism is felt to be on shaky ground. The Empire is ending and someone is to blame for the loss of unchallenged supremacy. Fears of imminent economic collapse, civil war, mass destruction, and death are expressed by those involved in spirituality and others who are not. The labelling of conspiracy theories as 'fake news' around the 2016 election attests to this growing anxiety. As indeed does the outcome of that election, won as it was on a platform of "make America great again".

The fake news controversy surrounding the 2016 election points to the extent to which many of these theories contain implicit right wing positions, for example anti-federal government, anti-UN and other supra-national institutions, anti-gun control, anti-science and intellectuals. This issue is raised by Ward and Voas when explaining why it is surprising to them that conspiracy theories, so often right-wing and aggressive, should find an eager audience among the more left-wing and pacifist "new age" (2011: 104). Asprem and Dyrendal disagree with this characterisation, however, pointing to the historical trajectory of the dark side of esotericism, found especially in Traditionalism, which defines itself in opposition to the Establishment in resurrecting the true wisdom that has been suppressed (2015: 374). In rejecting the rationality of the third dimension, my informants were placing themselves in this lineage, seeking out alternative sources of authority on which to found their claims to higher knowledge. This knowledge is stigmatised not because it is wrong or irrational but because of a cover-up, because it threatens to subvert the mainstream authorities and their sources of power. The true source of power is found in the individual who has the ability to create reality and end third dimensional power structures through their spiritual evolution.

Conspiracy theories are an important part of spirituality because they offer a form of theodicy. I have suggested that they are part of how knowledge is socially constructed in spirituality. Is the continued use of the modifier 'conspiracy' justified? What makes a 'theory' a 'conspiracy theory' is the surfeit of meaning and explanation, over-extending the agency and intentionality behind complex socio-political situations

[45] One of the two country music stations in Northern Arizona had a break from their scheduled airplay at noon each day to "thank god that we live in the greatest country on earth", and then played the opening bars of the Star-Spangled Banner.

(Fassin 2011). Conspiracy theories suggest that the government often does not work in the people's interests, that corporations put profits above safety, that there is a lot that scientists do not know, that the average American has very little control over their environment, that the game is rigged against them in so many ways, things that, as Leonard Cohen intoned "everybody knows". It is a way of talking about class and power that cloaks inequality in the mystery of conspiracy; it grants intention to situations that seem harmful and unfair. It creates someone to blame. There is a reason for the darkness and suffering in the world; there is also a solution to it, awakening and following the spiritual path.

Awakened Aliens: Continuities and Discontinuities on the Spiritual Path

"We all have that heritage, no matter what old land our fathers left. All colors and blends of Americans have somewhat the same tendencies. It's a breed – selected out by accident."

- John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 1952, p. 568

There is a link between the 'conspiracy theories' discussed in the last chapter and the eschatology of spirituality as outlined in the first; disclosure. Disclosure is the idea that the US government knows that extraterrestrials (ETs) are real and their ships have been visiting the Earth for many years and, sooner or later, they will reveal this to the public. At the 2012 conference I attended, disclosure was described as a necessary part of ascension. The existence of ETs, and their ongoing involvement in human affairs, was essential to spiritual evolution. Disclosure is the revealing of 'truth', the moment of certainty over doubt, when questions will be answered, and the seekers will be no longer seeking; it is in many ways spirituality's Rapture. It marks the end of the cosmology of spirituality as something stigmatised and the beginning of the new age; when their beliefs change from 'conspiracy theory' to 'truth'. This movement has already happened for the individuals involved in spirituality; at a moment characterised as 'awakening'. In the previous chapter, I related how the discourse of conspiracy theories is framed as a counter-narrative of the awake as opposed to the sheeple; similarly, the spiritual path begins with an awakening when the light of spirituality is perceived and one awakens to the 'truth'. This chapter examines the continuities and discontinuities after awakening; what happens when individuals start their spiritual paths.

As a way of looking at the continuities and discontinuities of spiritual paths, this chapter focuses on a specific group; those who self-identify as 'starseeds'. Starseeds are ETs; they are aliens. Specifically, they are human bodies with alien consciousness. Individuals who self-identify as starseeds therefore seem to offer a radical disjuncture from the typical conception of American personhood. Analysing accounts of awakening

as becoming alien offers an acute vantage point through which to examine the transformation that occurs in individual identities and their social relations. In spirituality, aliens are beings from different planets or dimensions; however these beings are not ontologically separate from humans. Reincarnation and multiverses are central concepts in the cosmology of spirituality that unify human and alien. Both humans and aliens are incarnations of souls in different physical states; my informants would talk about previous incarnations of their soul on Venus, for example, or as a being in the seventh dimension. So aliens are actually the same as humans, just with different physical manifestations or to put it in the idiom of spirituality, different levels of density of vibration. Starseeds are a particular subset in that they describe how they were born in a human body, a dense third-dimensional form of corporeality, but then a 'seed' was planted inside their consciousness that developed, at different points for different individuals, into an awakened alien.

Starseeds collapse the alienness of aliens, as such they offer revealing insights into the continuities and discontinuities of the spiritual path. Conceptually, aliens are discontinuous with humans; to be alien is to be not human. Since the mid-20th century, the term has come to denote extraterrestrials, following reports of unidentified flying objects in the sky and mysterious crash sites in the New Mexico desert, a florid popular discourse has elaborated around stories of abductions, cattle mutilations, and flying saucers (Clancy 2005; Denzler 2001; Brown 2007; Dean 1998). Elements of this discourse combined with older theosophical ideas about ascended masters from other planets offering spiritual insights in a proliferation of what scholars call UFO religions (Partridge 2003; Zeller 2011; Lewis 1995, 2003; Palmer 2004; Thomas 2010; Saliba 2006). UFO religions are often brought under the theoretical category of 'new age' and are also closely related to channelling. Channellers receive messages from a range of non-corporeal entities, including ETs as well as angels, spirits, and ascended masters (Brown 1999). For channellers, aliens are another contactable being in their repertoire (Zeller 2011: 670). In Sedona, I observed Amateo Ra, who defined himself as a starseed, channel his higher self from Sirius in the future. The entity he channelled existed on another planet, in a higher dimension, in the future, but was also a version of himself; "the highest self energy of Amateo, the future essence of Amateo, a Sirian frequency

being, transmitting a Sirian energy". This collapses the distinction between alien and human, and moves the discourse of ETs and UFOs from strange beings coming in oddly shaped ships to abduct and harm humans to aliens being a part of humans. Being a starseed involves drawing continuities between human and non-human, present and future, self and other.

At the same time, spiritual awakening as an alien is a profoundly disruptive experience, separating individuals from kin groups, jobs, and 'mainstream' thinking. This chapter is about aliens but also alienation. The basic definition of alienation is a process through which somebody or something becomes alien to something else (Khan 1995: 36). For my informants, the process of awakening was inextricably linked to alienation from the norms, expectations, and ideals that they associated with 'mainstream' American society. Awakening is a rupture, a discontinuity; but it is also a

ETs and UFOs were a visible and often playful part of Sedona's cultural life. Taken at the annual Gumptionfest festival in West Sedona.

realisation, a revelation of something that was always there, a continuity. Aliens are stigmatised others; but in calling themselves aliens, my informants were able to realise something that they saw as approaching a more 'authentic' identity. They demonstrated a "will to be otherwise"; a volitional adoption of a new identity that confers a minority status (Povinelli 2012: 459). It erupted out of their previous life experience creating new possibilities but also new constraints. Becoming aliens meant adopting a stigmatised status; however, this was a response to a pre-existing feeling of alienation. Awakening was a separation but also an overcoming of separation; a spiritual path marked by continuities and discontinuities.

Awakenings: Conversion and Change

At the age of 40 in 2008, Mynzah had what he described as a kundalini awakening[46]. After smoking marijuana for the first time in ten years, he began to feel odd, and listened to the songs "Lateralus" and "Third Eye Blind" by the progressive rock band, Tool. He described feeling a burning sensation in his lower back and then saw two snakes going up his spine from the base. As they ascended, areas of his spine lit up; he would later describe this as his chakras activating. This developed into an out of body experience, where he experienced himself looking down at his body. He perceived two "blue beings" that cohabited his body with him that he would later acknowledge as part of him, what he called his "Mer Ka Ba"[47]. He travelled to another dimension, then came back and saw an arc of energy going out over him and a huge eye, charged with "pure

[46] Kundalini in spirituality is a term analogous to energy. Specifically, the kundalini rises from the root chakra at the base of the spine to the crown chakra above the head, culminating in spiritual enlightenment. It takes the form of two coiled snakes gradually or rapidly unravelling. Kundalini yoga aims to engage this process through movement and breathing exercises. The term Kundalini is derived from the name of a Hindu goddess, a consort of Shiva, who could appear as a vital force coiled at the base of the spine. Olav Hammer traces how this concept, along the with that of the chakras, is a reformulation of Tantric doctrine by theosophical writers in the late 19th century, specifically Charles Leadbeater, that has been combined with scientific concepts of 'energy' by late 20th century 'new age' authors, see Hammer 2004: 183-190.

[47] Merkabah is a form of Jewish mysticism, based on the Old Testament Book of Ezekiel. The word in Hebrew translates as 'chariot'. In the passage in Ezekiel, God is seen in a vision seated on his throne or chariot, see Scholem 1960. In spirituality the term is used most often in connection with spaceships. Those espousing beliefs in ancient aliens, that ancient peoples had contact with UFOs and recorded them in their sacred texts, interpret the biblical merkabah as a UFO. They translate the term as Mer = Light, Ka = Spirit, Ba = body, see for example http://www.crystalinks.com/merkaba.html

energy"[48]. He said it was like a light was turned on inside him, he could "see in the dark".

The next day he looked up the image he had seen on Google and found the exact same thing depicted under the title "kundalini awakening". He looked up kundalini awakening on the internet and it described what had happened to him the previous night. He claimed it was not a conscious choice to be awakened, however it was intentional on another level, it was prearranged and part of his reason for being in this dimension at this time. Following this awakening, he changed his life completely. He gave up his possessions, left his job at the Department of Education, sold his car, and moved to Sedona. He said he was "called" there, he had never heard of the place before, his guides told him about it. His guides were spiritual beings that lived on a ship in the Earth's upper atmosphere; he heard their guidance as a voice. One was the soul that animated his physical body before he "walked-in", when the starseed consciousness entered his human body, at age four, called Jaliel, who had been one of his guides throughout his incarnations. He called the moment when he entered his physical body and Jaliel left it a "soul exchange", and believed that his skin darkened after this event[49]. Mynzah considered himself "reborn", and he wore ankh rings to symbolise this.

Mynzah described himself as a Pleiadian walk-in and starseed. He explained this by describing the planet as a plant that grows and is harvested. Starseeds are planted on this planet to raise their own consciousness and that of others, to aid ascension to the fifth dimension, and thereby get closer to the divine[50]. He used the word God to describe divinity, and said that we are all God, we are all part of same divine essence; however we have forgotten this in the third dimension. The experience of the third dimension is separation, but this was a choice made by God to separate for no other reason than "because we could".

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[48] The data for this chapter on Mynzah comes primarily from my interview with him and subsequent informal conversations with him during my fieldwork period. He also wrote his own version and published it online, which contained the same narrative as he gave in our interview but with more detail, see https://mynzahosiris.wordpress.com/

[49] See Mynzah's autobiography on kundalini awakening, https://mynzahosiris.wordpress.com/2015/07/09/mynzah-kundalini-awakening-story/

[50] Heaven's Gate, a UFO religion that committed mass suicide in 1997, talked about aliens from the Next Level planting seeds in humans on this planet that spur spiritual evolution. Partridge connects this imagery to the Justinian doctrine of *spermatic logos,* where prior to Christ humans contain seeds of the word and can therefore come to partial awareness of God, see Partridge 2004: 176-177

Mynzah's soul originated in Maya, the sun in the Pleiades system. When this soul "walked in" when he was four years old, he suddenly became aware of his surroundings and family in a new way. The person whom he called "mom" was not really his mother, she was someone else. She was only the mother to his physical body, not to his soul. He knew he was not from here; he was from somewhere else. He became depressed by this realisation, he felt abandoned in a reality he did not like; "there was no one here like me, no one who thought like me, no one who saw what I did, and no one who knew what I knew"[51]. He told his cousin about this experience, but no one else in his family, as he did not trust adults, including adults in his own family. He pushed it away as he grew up, comparing himself to a gay person in the closet, he forgot there was a closet, and went back to "sleep" to fit in. His mother raised him in the Baptist church. Even as a child, he thought of what he heard in church as "lies". He felt on some level that hell did not exist, animals had souls, and reincarnation was real even though the pastor said the opposite in church. However, fitting in meant accepting their "lies" rather than holding to his own intuitive "truth".

Mynzah received messages from his Star Family, the other souls he was related to in the universe. He did not call himself a prophet, but a "friend with a message"[52]. He told me there were many other starseeds in Sedona; they worked together but on a higher level not physically in the third dimension. He stressed that they were not a club or a "cult". They worked in a city of energy, or a "light city" above Sedona that vibrated on a different frequency invisible to 3D senses. There were also many ships orbiting the Earth; his soul was in one such ship. His physical body was a projection in the 3D while his spiritual essence was in a higher dimension, completing his mission aboard a starship.

Mynzah explicitly called what happened to him, both to me and in his online autobiography, an "awakening". He symbolised this in terms of a light turning on that enabled him to see in the dark; it gave him extra powers of perception he did not have before. Awakening is a central image in the history and narratives of conversion in

[51] Online autobiography, ch 1, https://mynzahosiris.wordpress.com/2015/07/09/chapter-one-in-the-beginning-autobiography-book-by-mynzah/
[52] Autobiography, ch Z, https://mynzahosiris.wordpress.com/2015/07/09/chapter-z-the-last-day-on-earth-autobiography-book-by-mynzah/

American religion, particularly evangelical Christianity. The "Great Awakening" in 1730-1740s among Protestant colonialists was just one of periodic revivals that stimulated religious fervour and dramatic conversions (Lambert 1999; Heimert 1966; Meyer 2011). Mynzah's image of a light turning on to pierce the darkness recalls the final lyrics of the 18th century Christian hymn, Amazing Grace; "was blind, but now I see". This song draws upon the sudden conversion of its author, John Newton, after near-death in a storm and was featured extensively in the "Second Great Awakening" in the early 19th century (Turner 2002). Being raised American Baptist, it is likely Mynzah was familiar with this song and related figurations of conversion. In his work on spiritual autobiographies of the evangelical awakening of early modern Methodists in England, Hindmarsh describes a "U-shaped pattern of conversion" that replicated in microcosm the biblical cycle of Creation, Fall, Redemption, new Creation (1999: 915). The emphasis in evangelical awakening narratives is on discontinuity; the old is discarded for the sake of the new, the sinner is reborn into a godly life.

Equally, the spiritual awakening was a rupture in Mynzah's life path. It marked a transition from being a person concerned with his material conditions to being one concerned with his spiritual evolution. This was epitomised by giving up his job and possessions; again something that recalls the revivalists who forsook their old lives to follow or become itinerant preachers (ibid: 920). However, the important difference is that the evangelical awakenings occurred within the structure of an organised religion, one that many in the community were equally enthused about. Mynzah's awakening was endogenous; responding not to the words of a preacher but to a casual social occasion where he smoked marijuana. He had to search out a community of like-minded people afterwards, which he found through an internet search engine. His spiritual awakening can be likened more to the process of becoming a shaman as described cross-culturally than conversion to an organised religion such as Christianity (Lewis 1989 [1971]; Rösing 2006; Vitebsky 2000). It was individual, disruptive of kin relations, economic status, and mental health; an isolating experience that transformed his sense of self from that of an ordinary human to an alien inhabiting a human body.

In the anthropology of Christianity conversion is often depicted as a Damascene moment; abrupt, disruptive, and transformative (Harding 1991, 2001; Robbins 2004).

Engelke warns against overstating the discourse on discontinuity in anthropological studies of conversion. First in his analysis of Masowe apostolic conversion, he uses the Comaroffs idea of a "long conversation" of transitioning to a new religious adherence, one that is always incomplete, a state of becoming (2004: 105-106). Again in his work on British secular humanism, he attends to the ways that the narrative of a complete break with the past can be a discursive strategy; for humanists a way of setting themselves against what they perceive as their other, organised religion, in particular Christianity (2014: S293). Engelke frames the conversion (if it can indeed be named such) to secular humanism as a process of realisation, his informants read works describing humanism and realised that this was how they already thought (ibid: S296). Johnston uses a similar interpretation of the conversion narratives of Pagans in the US, discovering what Paganism was about was interpreted as a realisation that that was what they had always been about, especially the attitude to nature (2013: 561). Crapanzano finds in American legal and religious literalism a construction of continuity that supports the status quo for both Christian Fundamentalists and Constitutional Originalists (2000).

This focus on realisation as opposed to transformation echoes Luhrmann's discussion of the adoption of ritual magic practices by English middle-class professionals as "interpretive drift", a process she describes as slow and steady (1989: 307-323). Continuity is present in Mynzah's narrative; he talks about the significance of his childhood experiences as a walk-in, which he then forgot and pushed away as he came to understand their stigmatised status in society, and to his family in particular. He was always a walk-in, but only as an adult was he able to realise this fully. It was through his kundalini awakening that he was able to embrace that which he had always been. His portrayal of the kundalini awakening as a singularly disruptive event should not be understated, however, as with Engelke's secular humanists, it was a way of framing what he no longer was. Awakening as a starseed involves more than just converting to a different religion; it was a sense of being a totally different type of being, one that was not fully human, nor entirely present on Earth. It was an ontological shift as well as interpretive drift; a realisation of what he was already, yet also a radical change in the way he was living his life.

We Are One: Kinship and Family after Awakenings

The woman introduced as Sierra Neblina was tall; over six feet. Thick wavy brown hair tumbled to her shoulders, and she looked around at the audience with an assured gaze. "The entity known as Sierra is not here," she said, "Commander Ananda is here today, from the Galactic Council." Commander Ananda was an ambassador to Earth aboard a lightship serving the Galactic Federation of Light. He was 1500 years old, but 70 years ago he heeded the call of Gaia and chose to be incarnated as a "conscious soul" in a human body called Sierra Neblina. He described giving his final commands to his crew, entering a small pod, flying down a chute to Earth where he transformed into a point of light outside the atmosphere. There he studied the "soul group" or family that he would be born into. Then he was reborn as Sierra Neblina, a woman of Cherokee and Irish descent, who at the time she was speaking at this conference appeared to be in her forties or fifties. In order to keep certain "codes" active, Sierra was conscious of Commander Ananda from the time of her incarnation; so that the density of the human physical body would not get in the way of their mission, which was to expose the hybridisation programme of the government that was using humans with Native American blood as hosts to birth human-alien, or "galactic" as they preferred, hybrids. So from incarnation Sierra was part-human and part-galactic.

Sierra's childhood was ruptured by abuse, something she blamed on her mother's repeated abductions by the government. The trauma fractured her mother's psyche and she re-inflicted the suffering onto her children. Sierra was also abducted and carried a hybrid to term that was then taken by the government. The government was in league with a race of aliens called Zetas, who needed the hybrids to rebuild their race. They wanted "Native American bloodlines" because Native Americans were connected to the Pleiades. This programme was halted in the 1990s, an effort in which Sierra took part. Now she ran a programme called TWIN to help those still struggling with their experiences, other lightworkers, starseeds, and walk-ins. She defined herself as a "braided walk-in", a human body with a galactic consciousness she had been aware of since birth. Sierra and Commander Ananda inhabited the same body, their consciousnesses intertwined, sometimes Sierra spoke and sometimes it was Commander

Ananda. As a result of this, she had abilities since her youth that had been engineered in the womb; she was a higher vibrational consciousness in dense human form, trained, and ready to help wherever she was needed. As part of her mission she had been a sniper in the Marines, the first woman in frontline combat as part of Operation Desert Storm in the Gulf War.

Sierra was speaking as part of the 2012 Ascension conference, hosted by the internet site and blog radio show the Golden Age of Gaia, mentioned in previous chapters. Since she therefore had a measure of renown in spirituality focused internet circles, I googled her and found that a site dedicated to exposing what it called "new age frauds" had taken steps to debunk her identity by adding public records of her military service, as a member of the Military Police in Colorado, and her birth name, Shannon Marie Hare[53]. Members of the forum denounced her as a con artist and fake.

Names grant the power to both fix identity and detach from it (Bodenhorn and vom Bruck 2009: 2). Shannon Marie Hare became Sierra Neblina, who was an incarnation of Commander Ananda. Each of her roles had a different name. Sierra Neblina was the name she used in everyday life; Commander Ananda was part of her consciousness; Shannon Marie Hare was the name on her birth certificate. To debunkers on the internet the existence of her legal name proved her a fraud; from their perspective her identity was fixed by legal document. The creation of her new identity as Sierra Neblina was an act of detachment, separating her from her existence as an ordinary human. Renaming herself erased her social history. However, this social history persisted in the form of legal documents; by some these are given more weight, the legal name is the 'true' name that reveals the 'real' identity of a person.

Commander Ananda was another named entity; one that existed in the same physical body at the same time as Sierra but only sometimes used her voice; a change that she announced with an illocutionary speech act (Austin 1975 [1962]; Bodenhorn and vom Bruck 2009: 11; Lambek 2009: 125). A walk-in is analogous to a spirit that possesses a human host; they inhabit the same body but they have different identities. Mynzah's was called Jaliel. Naming spirits is an important, if not definitive act, in their realisation for Malagasy speakers of Mayotte (Lambek 2009: 116). Since the body is the

[53] http://www.newagefraud.org/smf/index.php?topic=4211.0

same, the name becomes crucial in separating the human from the spirit; Lambek questions whether without a name a spirit can even have an identity. As with awakening, the process is one of realisation as well as transformation, a process of continuous becoming that is manifested by naming.

Lambek remarks on how personal names are mostly given by others, indeed, he suggests parenthetically that, "If anyone knows of an ethnographic case where people routinely name themselves I would be glad to hear about it" (ibid: 119). Sedona seems like such a case. New arrivals began to change rapidly, often adopting different styles of dress and a new name. New names were adopted as part of their spiritual path; a new name to reflect the new direction their life had taken. Names were often evocative of the life they now wished to lead, such as Wild Spirit or White Dove. Many people continued to use their given names, it was not necessary or required in any way to think up a new name to 'prove' commitment to the spiritual path; it depended on the feeling of the individual and their personal experiences. Some continued to evolve their name with their spiritual path, again depending on how they felt, so Mynzah RavenCrow became Mynzah Atum and then Mynzah Osiris while I knew him, each new name being adopted with no more fanfare than changing it on his Facebook profile. Interestingly, since Facebook changed its policy to require profiles with legal names, Mynzah has separated his into a public persona page called "Mynzah" and another under his legal name, David Cole.

Despite the acceptance of self-naming in Sedona, there was still a certain amount of cynicism about "Sedona names". People who had been there longer would often roll their eyes at the sound of another's fanciful new name and call it a "Sedona name", a name they had just adopted upon moving there. To counter this, they would claim an alternative ancestry to their own unusual name, pointing out that it was not a "Sedona name". Buttercup, who explained how her name came from the surname her parents had selected for the family because neither wanted to adopt the other's given surname, and ThreeTrees, who claimed his name was the result of a vision quest, both emphatically denied theirs were Sedona names. Rarely were the invented names also their legal names; they were names adopted and used in common speech only. This facet of identity was flexible on the interpersonal level, however their legal identities remained

fixed on a bureaucratic level as part of state surveillance of citizens (Lambek 2013: 253-254). I asked Mynzah what name appeared on his military pension cheque, and he said it was Sergeant David Cole. Lambek suggests there is no freedom of identity because names are given by others not the self and fixed by the state. Self-selected Sedona names faced opposition from other Sedonans, the regulations of social media corporations, and anti-new age 'debunking' websites.

This suggests that the flexibility of identity that many tried to exercise on their spiritual path was tempered by and sometimes in tension with the demands of the modern market-oriented bureaucratic state in which they lived. They called themselves what they wanted; but the state had a different name for them, unless they took the step of legally changing their name as Sierra Neblina did. This did not seem a popular option, perhaps because it cost money, but more importantly it would have again fixed them to a specific name rather leaving them free to call themselves what they felt like in the moment. The demands of the society they lived in placed constraints on their free spiritual expression. Bodenhorn and vom Bruck examine the multifarious ways that naming acts to both conceal and reveal identity, operating not simply as assignation but also "discovery, divination, recognition, or inheritance" (2009: 3). Names entangle persons in social matrices. In Sedona, this took the particular contour of a spiritual path; a name announced its beginning but that same name could be used to level accusations of fraud. Gell's discussion of volt sorcery, mentioned in previous chapters, is again apposite, giving something a name is a way of binding and controlling representation (1998: 103). Granting oneself a new name on the spiritual path was a way of controlling the representation of the self; but this was always under negotiation and subject to competing views from peers in Sedona, the wider internet community involved in spirituality, and the state.

Naming is of course central to kinship; in the US, typically an individual's name is given by its biological parents at birth (or even before, see Layne 2009). Changing one's birth name and family name is a way to "decenter" biological kin (Bodenhorn and vom Bruck 2009: 22). Spiritual awakenings often distanced people from their biological kin and drew them closer to a new formulation of family. Sierra Neblina talked about viewing her new family from space, calling them a "soul group". Unbeknownst to me at

the time I saw Sierra speak, I had met others in Sedona who identified as being part of her soul group. I met Alan through the Arizona Conscious Communications email list, on which he had advertised himself as a shaman, life coach, death coach, lightworker, and web designer. He had moved to Sedona in January 2012, he was in his late fifties. He told me he started on the spiritual path when he met his "sister", Rebecca, at a Landmark education conference he was running for a private firm, where he was responsible for organising seminars teaching work effectiveness[54]. Rebecca was his sister by choice. His blood relations, his sister, brother, and two children, had not spoken to him for between five to ten years. He described Rebecca and he as coming from the same "soul pod", which meant the same as what Sierra called "soul group", another term was "soul family"; a group of souls who are reincarnated together and have deep karmic connections. They ran a business together and lived together in Sedona, indeed his reason for coming to Sedona was because she moved there.

Prior to his awakening, he was a multi-millionaire business consultant in Portland, Oregon. Originally from Seattle, he had attended college in Portland and stayed there to develop his career. A self-described "hatchet man", he was responsible for firing staff from companies in trouble and fixing their problems. He had a huge $6 million house, his wife was a member of the country club; their two kids got everything they wanted. He had a list of things he wanted and when he would get them by. Then he got it all by the age of 44 and thought, what now? He was not happy or satisfied with having everything he had thought he wanted. He needed to change. He first admitted that he was gay. This led to a messy divorce where his wife got everything, and some things were even burnt and destroyed. His children now would not talk to him because he took their nice life away from them. He left with a duffel bag and his baby book. He started again as a publisher of a gay-friendly business directory in Colorado, where he met Rebecca. They ran a business together in Sedona helping souls transition to their next incarnation, what they called "death coaching".

Rebecca was a registered nurse and had worked for many years in care homes

[54] Landmark Forum is one of the organisations that combine spirituality with positive thinking, personal wellbeing, and corporate profitability. A number of my informants had involvements with it during my fieldwork describing it variously as "life-changing" and "cult-like"; see https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/dec/14/ameliahill.theobserver ; on the positive thinking culture within corporate America more generally, see Ehrenreich 2009.

and hospices. She referred to Alan as her "brother". Rebecca had been married to Sierra Neblina. She described Sierra as a student of hers but she had stopped teaching her because Sierra stopped following her truth. Sierra had since broken up with her, but Rebecca told me that she knew they were still together when she listened to Sierra's spirit rather than her conscious being. Her conscious being spoke from ego whereas her spirit spoke from source. Sierra had "a lot to work through" in this lifetime, according to Rebecca, but they had had many lifetimes together, they were "soul mates", in each incarnation they had lessons to learn through their relationship. So they both were and were not married, she told me, with a smile. They were married in the sense that they were soul mates, partners through many incarnations who would always find each other in each new lifetime and go through what they had to learn this time. But they were not married in the legal, 3D sense, nor were they, at the time of the interview, in a romantic relationship.

After a period of several months without seeing any of them, I bumped into Rebecca at one of the grocery stores in Sedona, and she told me Alan had moved out and would not speak to her. She did not know why. She said it was time, though, he was meant to stay with her for two weeks and he ended up staying fourteen months. The business was just her responsibility at the moment; she was still trying to set something up, and doing her job as a registered nurse as well. So Alan was no longer Rebecca's "brother", he had left Sedona and moved on. According to his Facebook page, he next became a life coach in San Diego. He did not reply to any of my messages asking why he left Sedona. Sierra had left the Golden Age of Gaia and started her own endeavour, Galactic U.

When I asked people I knew in Sedona systematically about their "soul family", the common answer was that this referred to people on the same spiritual path as they were. Sometimes they were referred to as "Sedona family", meaning specifically the other spiritual people living in Sedona, or "galactic family", if the interlocutor focused their spiritual path on aliens. What became clear to me was that those involved in spirituality figured their relations with others on a spiritual path in kinship terms, as family. This was perhaps simply because they felt closer to people who had the spiritual path in common; it was a way of recognising common beliefs and group membership.

However there was more to it, as it was often the case that going on the spiritual path had involved rejection by or of their biological family. On the one hand, they were seen as weird, strange, ridiculous, even mentally ill by their families. On the other hand, there was a sense from some of my informants that they did not want to associate with people who were not on a spiritual path because that lowered their vibration. Sometimes, leaving their family was formulated as a necessary part of being on the spiritual path. Others found their families eventually came to terms with the change.

Spiritual brothers and sisters, soul family, are a form of elective kin, who are chosen rather than biologically related. The classic work on American kinship by Schneider formulates kin relations as organised by symbols of "blood" and "law" (1980: 21-27). Blood relations have primacy in kinship networks; they are supposed to be the ties that bind for life, with relations by law significant but based on codes of conduct and therefore lacking the same permanence. Numerous studies have subsequently revised the applicability of Schneider's formulation to the whole of 'American kinship' (Cannell 2013; Weston 1991; Collier, Rosaldo, and Yanagisako 1997; Nelson 2006; Stack 1974; Yanagisako and Delaney 1995). Weston analyses the kin networks of gays and lesbians in San Francisco, looking at the way kin terms are reorganised as often coming out distances or breaks down relations with biological family (1991: 26-29). Close friends, partners, and ex-partners become kin, often using the terms "brother" and "sister" to denote intimate bonds of interdependence and solidarity. Kin terms are also used to signify membership in a community, although Weston questions the unitariness of "the gay community" (ibid: 127). Soul family can be seen in a similar way, signifying close relations that have sprung up in place of strong connections with biological kin and symbolizing spiritual like-mindedness and identity that are still framed on a structure of biological kinship.

Soul family can also be likened to membership of religious communities, for example Puritans called each other "brother" and "sister" (ibid: 126). This is perhaps more of a general feature of closely bonded communities that oppose their intimate interconnections to those with outsiders, for example Mynzah also referred to his fellow Marines as his "brothers". There was a more cosmological implication in the term soul family though. Cannell discusses how Mormons believe their families chose each other

before birth, challenging Schneider's characterisation of the "American family" as based on "blood" and "law" as a Protestant majority idea that ignores the historical contingency of the terms and how different religious groups constructed them differently (2013: 225). For Mormons, all families existed before birth in the prior world, even adopted families, and chose each other on the Great Tree (ibid: 226). Similarly, the soul family was a group of souls born into this incarnation together; they existed prior to this life together and chose each other. Sierra Neblina used the image of being a light hovering above the Earth and viewing her soul family. "Soul pod" extends the plant metaphor of a group of seeds growing separately from a single source. Sometimes the image of a contract was used; Alan talked about signing a contract with Rebecca prior to incarnation that they would be together throughout their lifetimes. The soul family could include other souls who were incarnated as humans, such as Alan and Rebecca, or souls incarnated as human and their guides, who are intermediaries between 3D and spirit that give advice and tips, such as Mynzah and Jaliel, or humans and aliens, such as Sierra and Commander Ananda. These relationships are figured as kin relations, but they are not so much chosen as preordained. Sometimes these relationships could be biologically connected as well, such as Mynzah's twins who were fellow starseeds from Venus. The changes that occurred with a spiritual awakening had extensive ramifications for kinship. Biological kin were distanced, and new kin relations were established, figured as spiritual. Kin relations could be between humans, aliens, and other entities with different vibrational frequencies. The symbols of "soul" and "seeds" were as significant as "blood" and "law".

Although ideologically, soul family was an inclusive term and seemed to offer the opportunity for any whom also followed the spiritual path to have the closeness of kin relations, there were limitations to the concept of soul family in practice. This can be seen in the case of Alan, who left Sedona and stopped talking to Rebecca, as once relations with his biological family had broken down. Although Rebecca considered herself "married" to Sierra on a soul level, on a personal level their relationship had broken down because Sierra was not "living her truth". This suggests that in practice soul families were predicated on social codes of conduct rather than bonds that would last many incarnations. This reveals gaps between the daily experience of family and the

ideological construction of what the ideal family should look like (Nelson 2006: 786). Nelson argues that family is not simply a structure that exists sui generis but a performative act, people 'do' family. In the case of soul families, what is figured as a preordained and even transcendent kinship relation is in practice dependent on the performative actions of the persons involved.

People involved in spirituality are often cast as "seekers" (Roof 1999: 294; Wuthnow 1998: 7; Cimino and Lattin 2002: 21). My informants in Sedona did seem to fit this characterisation moving frequently between groups, workshops, conferences, trainings, channellings, and classes. But it seems that perhaps what they are searching for, more than God, is family. They do not fit with their natal families anymore, particularly the starseeds, or they have rejected their family for other, personal reasons. The 'nuclear family' as described by Schneider has been affected in the US by broader structural shifts such as children not following their parents' religion, different social class possibilities, occupational differences, and sexuality and gender politics (Sennett and Cobb 1972; Sennett 2007; Ortner 2003; Weston 1991). Within a more mobile economy the family unit becomes a form of dependency, which can be viewed negatively, but some individuals miss its protective force (Sennett and Cobb 1972: 100). Seekers in spirituality search for an alternative, more accepting than their biological families, but still offering that loving protective force. However, soul families seemed to rest on fragile ground, and things fell apart; the groups splinter, friends fall out, your sister is no longer your sister, was she to begin with? Soul family provided a weak replacement for a kinship system undergoing extensive reorganisation caused by social forces much broader than the individual lives caught up in it. The result of this reorganisation was often a sense of belonging nowhere, a loneliness, seeking for someone like them but finding no one, a feeling of alienation.

Alien Nation: Race and Class

Ethnically mixed, Mynzah's father was Blackfeet, white, and black, and his mother was Cherokee, French, and Spanish. On his birth certificate, it was written "Native

American" for his mother and "Negro" for his father. I asked him if he described himself as Native American and he said no, since he was only part Native American and he did not want to mislead people to thinking that he grew up on a reservation. His father was a heroin addict and alcoholic, who was frequently in trouble with the police. His parents divorced when he was nine, which prompted a move from East Palo Alto in the San Francisco Bay area to Exeter, in Central California. On his first day of school in Exeter, the other students called him a "nigger". Exeter was a predominantly white community; he was one of only a handful of black residents. Later on he did make friends; he emphasised he wanted to be seen for who he was, not his skin colour. On visits back to East Palo Alto, a predominantly black community, he found he was no longer accepted there because he spoke in a way that was identified as "white".

Personally, he did not identify as black or mixed race or even as a person; he believed he was from another planet entirely. Being human was a matter of playing a certain role to him; difference was a performance, as if people were merely characters in a play or a reality TV show[55]. In his essence, which he labelled his soul, he was neither black nor white, nor even a boy as opposed to a girl, he was a "walk in", something else entirely. Yet over time he understood himself as a boy and that that was said to be different from girls. He continued to believe in gender equality, he told me that women needed to be empowered and stand up to men, whereas men needed to embrace the feminine and "get off the throne". As a child, he witnessed the physical abuse of his mother by her boyfriend, which upset him so much that during one incident he turned a garden hose on them. The domestic violence was not limited to their relationship; his mother beat him after her divorce from his father, at one point accidentally breaking his arm, and his grandmother and his great aunt also hit him. The lesson he learned from this was that those who say they love you hurt you. He described himself as a feminine child, very sensitive, who cried at everything, particularly fighting. However he changed as an adolescent; he began to get into trouble himself, trying heroin and crack cocaine.

After leaving high school, he joined the US Marine Corps in order to get his life back on track. Looking back, he was critical of the institution, commenting that the

[55] Autobiography, ch 4, https://mynzahosiris.wordpress.com/2015/07/09/chapter-four-3rd-to-the-4th-power-autobiography-book-by-mynzah/ ; this echoes Peter's belief system in the first chapter, although the two did not know each other.

Marines train young men to kill, which is not their natural disposition. However, at the time he was an enthusiastic recruit and when he was discharged over an administrative error at the start of the Gulf War, he felt guilty because he was "deserting his brothers". Now he felt bad for them because it was bad for the soul to be in the military. Following his discharge, he became a police officer in a sheriff's department in Central California. Later he became a school counsellor, helping kids before they got into jail, and then a bureaucrat in the Department of Education, helping poor families with claims. He had a BA in management and organisation development, and an unfinished MA in business and education, with an emphasis on school counseling from Fresno Pacific University. During this period of his life, he was trying to be a "good American citizen"[56]. He was committed to supporting and working for "the system", until his awakening abruptly broke him out. It is relevant that both Mynzah and Sierra Neblina had military connections; the US military figures largely in alien mythology as participating in, benefitting from, and covering up contact with ETs (Clancy 2005: 94). The highly complex technological apparatus of the US military fills America skies with strangely shaped crafts, spurring tales of UFOs, especially in the Southwest which has been used as a vast proving ground for military equipment from the 1950s atomic tests onward (Boyer 1994). It is not incidental that Mynzah followed participation in the military with a spiritual path centred on being an alien.

Mynzah told me that when he was in the Marines, and his subsequent careers, he was following the American dream. He defined the American dream as going to college, getting a job, a house, getting married, having children, then the children achieve all those things but better; a constant cycle of the same material things getting better each time. But then he realised it was just a program to keep us in line and controlled, to stop us thinking for ourselves. He called it freedom *from* choice, just following what we had been told to do and to want. He preferred Timothy Leary's dictum instead: "think for yourself; question authority".

Spirituality is not an anti-capitalist or anti-modernist political 'movement' in any sense of the term; it does however seem to involve a reorientation in relation to the

[56] Autobiography, ch A, https://mynzahosiris.wordpress.com/2015/07/09/chapter-a-awakened-autobiography-book-by-mynzah/

ideological construct of the American dream. Ortner suggests the American dream is part of middle-class identity; most Americans perceive themselves to be middle-class and this "means simply all those Americans who have signed up for the American dream, who believe in a kind of decent life of work and family, in the worth of the 'individual' and the importance of 'freedom', and who strive for a moderate amount of material success. It is everybody except the very rich and the very poor" (Ortner 1998: 8). Does it then follow that Mynzah's explicit abandonment of the American dream means that he is no longer middle class? As with Amelia in chapter two, the spiritual path can be elaborated as part of a shift in downward social mobility, mystifying a change in material conditions as a spiritual choice. However, unlike Amelia who found spirituality after losing everything, Mynzah gave up his comfy middle class life in order to go on his spiritual path. This complicates this relationship between the spiritual path and downward social mobility.

There is a difficulty talking about class in America because of the widespread denial that a rigid deterministic structure of social class exists (Durrenger 2008; Cerroni-Long 2008; Ehrenreich 1989; Ortner 2003; Vanneman and Cannon 1987; Newman 1988; Sennett 2003). Class structures are meant to belong to the hierarchical Old World; in America meritocratic individualism reigns and so class is no longer relevant. Anyone who works hard can 'bootstrap' themselves to success. This does not mean that there is not an awareness of social and economic inequalities in America, it means that those inequalities tend to be framed as the result of personal choice or failure, or the result of racial disparities. An interesting recent change in class discourses in the US is the emergence of a reified 'white working class' most often referenced in relation to the outcome of the 2016 election (Sampson 2016; Hochschild 2016; Isenberg 2016).

Echoing these discursive notes, Mynzah mentioned that his mother's boyfriend was a farm worker and that his family were poor in relation to the white families in the community, however he focused on this as a racial issue rather than a class dynamic. Class was only mentioned explicitly by two people in the two years I was in the field. Donna, a black woman writer and probiotics salesperson, described three "cultures" in Sedona; the upper class who could live where they wanted, the middle class who were glad to be living there, and those who were "just happy to be here, and wouldn't be

anywhere else". Significantly, she did not label this group lower or working class. The other was a white male spiritual tour guide who styled himself "Mr Sedona", who told me that there was a marked wealth polarisation in Sedona, people were either very rich or very poor, and that I was sitting with Sedona's "middle class" – him and his business partner. In suggesting this structure, "Mr Sedona" was reproducing a discourse of the 'squeezed' middle class in America; that economic inequalities were becoming so extreme under neoliberal policies, especially after the financial crisis, that the middle class was disappearing (Ortner 2013: 194-198).

In her history of the English working class, Todd indexes class in two ways; as a relationship "based on inequalities of power" and as a self-identification (2014: 4). Class is a relative marker of identity constructed through perceptions of self and other. In Donna's scheme there is a clear gradation based on inequality; the upper class can do what they want, the middle class are grateful if they get it. The lower or working class remains unnamed, identified only through a platitude; an empty space filled with the discursive silence on American class. This silence is magnified by a spatial absence; the working class is isolated and separated from the middle class and upper class in "urban villages" of ethnic enclaves in the US (Cobb and Sennett 1972: 10). Sedona was an enclave compared to the surrounding towns; the higher rents and house prices meant service workers, many of whom were Hispanic, lived in Cottonwood, Cornville, or Camp Verde and commuted to Sedona for work (Ivakhiv 2001: 161-165). Class was harder to see in Sedona because the price of the land, inflated due to the tourist industry, created a homogeneity in terms of race and class; most of the long-term residents were white and middle- or upper-class. The value of owning land in Sedona was so high that some of the 'super rich' owned property there, including Arizona Senator John McCain, actor Sharon Stone, and the estate of Walt Disney[57].

The poor moved on, as "Mr Sedona" explained to me, they came with dreams of following their spiritual path in Sedona and could not make it so had to leave. There were very few services available to support lower income people, particularly those who struggled to find housing. I met Vincent, a starseed from Sirius, in a coffee shop one

[57] Walt Disney owned a ranch near the creek in West Sedona; the street is now called "Disney Lane". Thunder Mountain in Sedona was said by locals to be the model for the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad ride in Disneyworld, Florida.

day, when he interrupted a conversation I was having with Dennis to excitedly praise his music. Vincent was homeless; I took him to breakfast once every week or so. He had previously worked for the federal government and the Peace Corps but had contracted HIV, developed AIDS, and by the time I knew him, suffered from AIDS-related cognitive dementia. He bounced from cheap rentals to motels to shelters run in Cottonwood by Catholic Charities and other groups. He did not stay in Sedona often; the police moved him on if they found him. He told me he manifested an invisibility cloak to protect himself from them, but it did not always work. As "Mr Sedona" said, there was a polarisation of wealth in Sedona; and those at the bottom end simply vanished from view.

However, poverty was often framed as a choice. Vincent consistently spoke of himself as manifesting exactly what he wanted; when his invisibility cloak did not work it was because he really wanted the police to find him and give him a warm shelter for the night in a jail cell. When I asked if he wouldn't rather have a house, he would often say that would mean he wouldn't have been where he was, and wherever he was that was where he was meant to be. The ideology of providence in spirituality masked social inequalities; everything that happened was what was meant to happen. Those who had to leave were "spit out" by the energy, as mentioned in the chapter two. This combined with individualism to create a double bind; the individual created reality as they wanted, so everything that happened to them was both preordained and their choice. If you were homeless, suffering, and dying on the street; that was exactly what you had chosen to happen in this incarnation. There was little sense of class consciousness or joining together to address widespread economic and social inequalities and advocate for change.

Class remains difficult for Americans to acknowledge; it runs against strong beliefs in "meritocratic individualism" (Newman 1988: 233; Durrenberger 2008: 130). Class is also subsumed by discourses on race and ethnicity (Sennett 2003: 12; Ortner 1998; Sacks 1989). Race is seen as self-evident and natural; it holds a much more potent historical visibility in the US than class due to the legacy of slavery (Roediger 2007; Alexander 2010; Baptist 2014; Beckert 2015). However, Ortner argues that race is intimately intertwined with class; whites who might be seen as working class due to

income or employment status define themselves as middle class because to be lower class is to be an ethnic minority[58] (1998: 7). Issues of race and class are then assumed to be significant only to those groups marked as part of the "underclass" (di Leonardo 1997). Being white and middle class is 'normal' and therefore unremarkable. This relegates poverty as an issue for racial others and blinds white Americans in particular to their own privileged status.

Mynzah dwelled upon how his ethnicity marked him out as different and the effects this had upon his life. He used alien mythology as an alternative to the racial discourse of America; he was not black or white, he was not even human but Pleiadian. This is literal 'alienation'; he recreated his identity as that of an alien. He did not fit in with blacks or whites, and so instead saw himself as from another planet, and interpreted the darkening of his skin at age four as a sign of soul exchange. Alienation has a complicated genealogy as a term, but to return to the basic definition given at the outset of this chapter of the process through which somebody or something becomes alien to something else, Mynzah's awakening can be seen through this lens. He was excluded from the white community in Exeter for being black; he was excluded from the black community in East Palo Alto for talking white. He became alienated along racial lines from both groups. He was also in a family situation of pervasive domestic violence; he then describes his experience of having an alien consciousness "walk in" at age four and realising that his mom is not really his mother. He became alienated from his mother. His career as a Marine, police officer, and bureaucrat was his attempt to "fit in" and be a "good American citizen"; this ended with his awakening when he perceived this system as controlling and authoritarian. He became alienated from the state.

Sennett suggests alienation could be a sane response to social conditions of inequality (1972: 193). Reflecting on Mynzah's narrative, his realisation of alienness comes in progressive stages capped off by a transformative awakening that responds to processes of social and political alienation. The philosophical literature on alienation is

[58] It is interesting to think through Ortner's point in relation to the recent discursive emergence of the 'white working class'. Of course, Ortner wrote this paper nearly two decades before the 2016 election. However, there is perhaps a relationship between the deployment of a reified category of 'white working class' and the white supremacist backlash against the first black president. In a sense, a reclamation of subjugated status for white people against perceived 'advantages' given to blacks and Hispanics based on their subjugated status. Chapter seven discusses issues of 'whiteness' in Arizona more fully. See also Hochschild 2016; Isenberg 2016.

rich, so any selection naturally excludes many productive alternatives, but to make sense of this process of alienation I turn to Hegel, who used two German terms for alienation: Entäußerung and Entfremdung (Khan 1995: 76-103; Mandel 1970: 13-16). In Marx's work on alienation, these two terms are used interchangeably and with substantively the same meaning, but in Hegel's the meaning is different and in this case, illustrative (Khan 1995: 28-29). Entäußerung is a giving up, externalisation, or realisation; for Hegel, alienation was inevitable because of the self-externalisation of labour, where a concept within the head is made external and therefore separate from its producer. This realises the product of labour but also necessitates a separation from its creator. Entfremdung is alienation, disaffection, estrangement; Hegel also talked about alienation in political terms, the citizen is alienated from the state through assigning their natural rights to it in exchange for its protection. In Mynzah's narrative of becoming an alien these two processes of alienation can be seen at work; the first of Entfremdung, estrangement from his family, his 'race', and the state, that is, becoming alien; the second of Entäußerung, realisation and externalisation of what he always was, that is, making himself alien.

Seeing himself as an alien, or starseed, therefore became an act of liberation, of defiance. If there was no one here like him, if he did not belong, then he could find himself elsewhere, beyond the confines of this planet and its social and economic inequalities. If people were racist to him, he transcended race. If his job controlled him, he gave it up. Being an alien therefore meant being more than human; it meant being able to free himself from the restrictive structures in which he was caught. Vincent's reimagining of homelessness as what he was meant to be doing can also be seen as liberating in this way, rather than as some form of false consciousness, he was transcending the idea that he should feel bad because of the situation he was in. His soul was from Sirius, and his mission on this planet was to live the life of Vincent and experience all that entailed, raising the vibration of everyone he met. He was not in a subjugated social and economic position; he was on a mission of a higher order. Mynzah too reframed his life to that of a higher calling. The act of declaring oneself an alien can be a powerful way of overcoming social and economic alienation.

However, Sennett's suggestion that alienation could be a sign of sanity is

followed by the reflection that American workers' feelings of alienation often result in individuation and internalisation of blame for the structural forces that they suffer. It is a way of dividing the self that rather than causing torment as in psychological models creates calm by separating the work-self from the "real self" and thereby obviating the inequalities of class from affecting who they 'really' are (Cobb and Sennett: 208). Mynzah's shift from good American citizen to alien likewise resulted in a divided self; locating the solution to the problems he suffered in his perception of himself not in the conditions that caused the problems in the first place.

Do What You Love: Work and Jobs on the Spiritual Path

In early March 2013, I attended a starseed conference at the Sedona Public Library. Its featured speakers I mostly knew already from numerous events, conferences, and workshops in Sedona. Those speaking at the conference had found ways to develop their self-identity as aliens into a means of supporting themselves financially. Krista Raisa channelled the Orion Council during the conference. I had met and interviewed her previously in Sedona; she ran a YouTube channel, Instagram feed, and Etsy store, where she uploaded videos of her channelling, sold products she made, promoted products that she got paid to market online, and gave advice and feedback to her subscribers[59]. Many of her videos were psychological and relationship advice coupled with talk about aliens[60]. She had also published an ebook of her channelled messages, and with her partner, Ra Arcturus, sold a metal necklace called a Sa-Ra key for $155 that aligned the chakras and raised vibrations[61]. Krista identified as a Pleiadian, whereas Ra identified as an Arcturan. They were "good aliens", meaning they were here to help the Earth in the war between dark and light, who surrounded Earth in their ships. Ra described Star Wars and Star Trek as "downloaded" or channelled messages. The key they sold helped

[59] https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgcLitnZO-nGpOyeS8jck5g ; https://www.etsy.com/uk/shop/kristasangels?ref=pr_shop_more ; products include crystal jewellery, a hat that says "starseed", and a font called "galactic faery".
[60] For example, "What is a Real Friend?" and "Find Your Starseed Origins Exercise"
[61] Ra has his own YouTube channel with Arcturan channelings: https://www.youtube.com/user/SIRIUSSTARSEED ; the Sa-Ra Key is available here http://www.sovereign-alliance.com/products/practitioner-tools/sara-key/

people who were "blocked" from awareness of the good aliens open up and receive their messages. Our bodies are separate from our souls, the soul is in another part of the galaxy but is connected to the body and controlling it. Interestingly, Krista and Ra both identified as biracial or mixed race, and their backgrounds involved living outside of the US, Krista defined as Finnish-America and was born in Finland, while Ra grew up in Germany. Both were in their mid-20s. Krista also had an apparently harmonious relationship with her parents, who both feature on her YouTube videos, offering spiritual insights of their own. There seemed to be less problem for Krista identifying as a starseed than for Mynzah or Sierra, perhaps because of her age, it caused less disruption in her family. She also did not leave an established career to follow her spiritual path but incorporated it into her working life from the outset.

When asked his occupation, Mynzah called himself a "server of the collective or the divine", he was here to serve. More concretely, he was an artist and he performed readings and healings. His income came from these activities and his military pension; he said he did not need much to live on. He did not own a car, he considered it too expensive, dangerous, and damaging to the Earth, and he did not want to pay for petrol

The Center for the New Age store included a separate UFO Center offering UFO-spotting tours at night

and give money to oil companies. He performed readings with cards - tarot, oracle, and Mayan zodiac. The latter was done online with a programme. He mainly did distance readings, using a person's full name and date of birth; he then emailed them a reading. His clients mainly contacted him online, he had a website, a Facebook page, a Pinterest page, and a YouTube Channel. Generally, he would only work with a person once, he would try to help them but he did not want them dependent on him nor did he want to keep taking their money. He did not have a schedule of fees for services as many readers did in Sedona, he would only ask for a "love offering", which could be anything they wanted to give from nothing to money.

Many of my informants expressed a desire to live without money so they could pursue their spiritual path without distraction. However, in the US, you must have a job. Social welfare is limited; there are fewer relief programmes for the poor in the US as a result of neoliberal policies shrinking the welfare state (Wacquant 2009: 76-109). More than this, having a job is central to the construction of identity for most Americans; it is the organising principle of the American dream (Ortner 1998: 8). A job means self-sufficiency and financial security. Having a job is closely tied to notions of self-worth, losing a job can subvert this; work has a moral value (Newman 1988: 233; Durrenberger 2008: 133; Sennett 2003: 109-111). Within this context, intentionally giving up a job to follow a spiritual path is a rebellious act. Mynzah rejected his career of working in "the system", where he made sufficient money to support himself and held positions of social authority, and instead got rid of his possessions and came to Sedona. Krista and Ra tried from the start of their working lives to earn money in a way consonant with their spiritual paths. Like many others who came to Sedona, they were drawn by the community of like-minded people and what was termed the energy of the place. But they still had to earn a living.

Economic instability was a factor in many of my informants' lives. They mostly lived on low incomes, earning between a few hundred to two thousand dollars a month was the norm. They tended to rent rooms in the houses of wealthier Sedona residents; people involved in spirituality were very rarely homeowners. It was common for new arrivals in Sedona to live in their car or camp in the forest or beside the creek until they found somewhere to live. Those who did have economic stability were ones who

maintained their employment outside their spiritual path, such as Peter in chapter one who worked as an attorney and Lana in chapter two who worked as a corporate consultant. Making a living as a starseed involved pursuing multiple different revenue sources including offering readings, running a YouTube channel or hosting an internet radio show, and selling products online and as a vendor at the frequent spirituality focused conferences held in Sedona.

Running a YouTube channel earns money by becoming what's called a "partner"; regularly uploading videos that receive thousands of views and hosting advertising for which they earn a proportion of the advertising revenue[62]. This appeals to starseeds because they can work from home while the wider community of people interested in UFOs and starseeds online provides a large and growing audience for their videos. Making money as a starseed thus has much in common with the short term "gig economy" that has grown particularly since the financial crisis of 2008, where workers are "contractors" rather than "employees" and they perform temporary, fixed-term, contract-based tasks with little more connection to their employer than a consumer has with a brand (Friedman 2014; De Stefano 2015). In this new economic form, labour protections are minimal, payment oscillates, and work is increasingly commodified. It is a direct result of the withdrawal of labour regulation in neoliberalism (Wacquant 2009; Harvey 2005). Younger people are more likely to be involved in the gig economy than older people. On this point it is significant that Mynzah had a military pension to provide reliable financial support.

Economic instability was rarely framed as problem, however. Many phrased their instability as an asset; they were free to follow their path, unfettered by responsibilities. There was a sense that it was better being against the system and embracing the instability that ensued than being trapped in a 9-to-5 that did not allow time for their spiritual exploration. It was framed as a choice. Instead of being restricted to a specific career path as a means for survival, they were free to create their life as they chose, a choice that was at the same time preordained by the soul contract they had worked out before this incarnation. Mynzah turned against his previous jobs in authoritarian institutions, rejecting the socio-economic structures of American society

[62] See https://www.theguardian.com/money/2012/jan/13/earn-money-youtube-viral-video

and the ideological construct of the American dream. In the previous section I suggested his identification as an alien was a form of overcoming social and economic alienation, is it possible to push this further into an analysis of work on the spiritual path as a way to overcome the alienation of labour?

In the works of both Hegel and Marx, alienation is thought through primarily in terms of labour (Khan 1995; Mandel and Novack 1970; Mészáros 1970). For Hegel, all labour is alienated, and this is a necessary principle of its existence due to self-externalisation, the product of labour cannot exist without separation from its creator. However, for Marx this is a historical condition of capitalism and as such not inevitable. The specific configurations of the market system and commodity production in capitalism, particularly in terms of private property and the division of labour, result in the alienation of the worker from both the products of labour and the means of production, which are controlled by the capitalists (Mandel 1970: 16). This means that transforming the political economic system can end alienation, and of course in Marx's theory this meant the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of communism. Marx's formulation of alienation was taken up by Frankfurt School philosophers Adorno and Horkheimer, who extend the theory of alienation beyond the division of labour to the whole of modern society, particularly manifested in mass media, the "culture industry", and political leadership, in which they saw alienation as increasing the risk of authoritarianism (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1987]). The constant search for work and pleasure by consumers, no longer producers, buffeted by the manipulations of media, dominated by technology, is a sign of "the compulsive character of a society alienated from itself" (ibid: 94).

Do the forms of work employed by starseeds following their spiritual paths offer a route beyond the alienation of labour? Mynzah's employment was self-directed and he retained control over its products; he sold his own art, readings, and writings online. His diversity of occupations echoes what Marx was proposing as the ideal in pure communism where the division of labour has ended and individuals are no longer subjected to a single task. However, Mynzah still had to alienate his products from himself by selling them in a market system in order to earn money to survive. More importantly, his earnings from these endeavours varied greatly, his stable means of

support was still his military pension. So he was primarily supported by the remittance he gained from "the system" he deplored as authoritarian and controlling.

Hosting a YouTube channel seems to be the embodiment of Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry; representing everyday life as entertainment, making life indistinguishable from its media representation, and earning a precarious living from this commodification of life itself. Living everyday life as an alien may seem a far cry from the flat, reduplicative media representations Adorno and Horkheimer decry; but this ignores how banal much of the starseed material is. Beyond the seeming sensationalism of claiming to be from the Pleiades or Sirius, the average video uploaded by my starseed informants was tediously mundane; how to tell your "true" friends from your "fake" friends, "giveaways" of products, how to deal with people who dislike you or lower your vibration. This is not to judge the content of those videos so much as to say their purpose seems to be to give people advice on how to live their daily lives as starseeds. And of course, the revenue from these videos comes from hosting advertising for a range of entirely third dimensional products. Being an alien is not so much a transcendent action but yet another form of lifestyle branding; another product to sell by workers who not only consume but are consumed.

All of which goes to suggest that rather than liberating themselves from labour alienation, my starseed informants were caught between dependence on state welfare or employment related benefits and the precarious unregulated short term gig economy, which offered little economic security and few labour rights. In Marxist terms, they did not own the means of production; that still belonged to Google and the other online platforms they used. In Adorno and Horkheimer's terms, they were engaging in the meaningless facsimile reproduction of culture for the sake of consumption, all the while creating more benefits for the corporations that hosted their endeavours than for themselves. While following their spiritual path meant rejecting traditional employment, such jobs are in increasingly short supply in the contemporary American economy. As we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, they were perhaps rejecting something that was not on offer in the first place.

Disclosure: Realisation/Transformation

Starseeds believed themselves in possession of a truth most others could not see; the existence of extraterrestrials and their ongoing involvement in this planet's affairs. Awakening opened their eyes; they could see the light. It was a personal journey of transformation but also a realisation; this is how things always were, they just did not see it before. Someday, soon, my informants hoped, disclosure would occur. This would be awakening on a mass scale. The light would come on for everyone; all eyes open; everyone awakens. Disclosure provides a frame for thinking through continuities and discontinuities on the spiritual path; it was a new revelation of something that was already the case. A transformative disjuncture that comes through a realisation of something already existing. It is both continuous, a reality that already existed, and discontinuous, radically different from what was assumed to be reality prior to disclosure.

Awakening as an alien prior to disclosure is a personal journey that lead my informants into a stigmatised identity; separating from their kin, quitting their jobs, feeling out of place in the 3D world. Mynzah felt out of place during a childhood in which he experienced racial exclusion, domestic violence, and family breakdown. If being human meant enduring such things, better to be an alien. In these circumstances, alienation could seem like the sane response to social inequality. But does calling oneself an alien really offer liberation from alienation? To take just the example of race in Mynzah's case, while for him being an alien from the Pleiades meant being neither black nor white, the wider discourse of 'races' of aliens reproduces American discourses of race as a natural, biogenetic 'fact'. The most common alien races mentioned by my informants were Nordics, Greys, Zetas, and Reptilians. Nordics were fair skinned, with blue eyes, beautiful, tall, and strong; a replication of the Aryan fantasies of white supremacists. Reptilians were the 'evil' aliens, dark skinned, serpentine, aggressive, and acquisitive; a mixture of Christian demonology with stereotypes of malicious dark skinned others (Partridge 2004: 179-183; Barkun 2003: 98-109, 141-157). The Zetas and Greys were said to create "hybrids" by searching for specific "bloodlines", in Sierra Neblina's story it was Cherokee; a reinforcement of ideas of 'blood' as an immutable

biogenetic substance that determines identity and attributes much as in racist fears of miscegenation. The Native Americans reappear throughout the tales of starseeds, such as Sierra Neblina, as a romanticised other used to endow spirituality in a way that by now has become familiar. To what extent is liberation from alienating social constructions of race really possible in this frame?

Moreover, equating seeing oneself as an alien with social and economic alienation glosses over an important point; in spirituality, aliens and humans are in fact the same. Both are entities in the universe of equivalent essence - they are both composed of energy - but with different vibrational frequencies. Starseeds are human bodies with alien, or as they would prefer galactic, souls; the human body exists in the third dimension while the soul is somewhere else, a different galaxy or onboard a ship. The soul is akin to a drone operator, manoeuvring the physical form at distance. This is called bilocation and has a rich history in western esotericism as part of astral projection beliefs and practices (Melton 1995: 1-12). The difference between humans and aliens is one of spiritual development; aliens are more advanced spiritually (except Reptilians) and starseeds are more advanced spiritually than 3D bound humans. It is a difference in degree not of substance; humans become aliens and aliens become human depending on the view taken. Difference is therefore an illusion of perspective. Disclosure reveals this universally. Alien and human are simply different energetic frequencies of the universe but they are both part of the universe and as such the same. There is no difference, no separation, no alienation, only oneness. The difference between alien and human is therefore collapsed, and what seems at first to be a radical discontinuity is in fact a seamless continuity.

Going Off Grid and Living on the Land: Spirituality and Neoliberalism

"We were two kids just tryin' to get out, lived on the dark side of the American dream. We would dance all night, play our music loud, when we grew up, nothing was what it seemed" – Lana Del Rey, *"Without You"*, 2012.

What struck me most the first time I came out to the land in Valle was the sheer desolation of the place. I had driven up the highway several times previously to get to the Grand Canyon; I had always given a cursory look around at the yellow and green plains dotted with sagebrush and twisted cedars and juniper and assumed, as probably most visitors do, that it was empty. When I drove Thom out there, the turning down the dirt road came up so suddenly that when he told me to turn I had to slam on the brakes and skid at what felt like a ninety degree angle, leaving black marks on the road from the burning rubber. Thom then directed me down a series of turns along the orange dirt, through the sand and dust, dips and holes. The dirt road led to more dirt roads, some with names, the occasional lonely pole standing at an intersection with a little green sign on it surrounded by wilderness. The dirt roads and the signs were the only visible enactments of the state. East Parker Street led to Thom's patch of dirt. We stopped and got out. I looked around; there was no water, no electricity wires, nothing. The nearest human dwelling was an RV and a truck with some solar panels on the other side of the dirt road, several acres away. The owner, Thom's new neighbour, drove by in a white pickup. We waved and he ignored us. People do not come out here to make a lot of friends, Thom mused, they come to stay hidden. I asked what he would do out here. Thom shrugged, he would find a way to make money, he was done working for other people. Now he could be free.

When he said "working for other people", Thom meant a specific type of work; low-income food service. It was the main type of work available to him; he specifically turned away from this type of work to live off-grid in Valle. This was his way of following his spiritual path because his understanding of spirituality was rooted in a

special connection to the land of Northern Arizona. Living off-grid for him meant living off the products of the land and not relying on the utilities provided by the state or private companies. There was a historical continuity of this way of living in Arizona, white people had been living off-grid and on the land since frontier times, and for Thom, a born-and-raised Arizonan, it was part of his family history.

Thom's spiritual path was built on these historical trajectories but it was also powerfully moulded by the more recently implemented institutional logics that constitute neoliberalism. Graeber describes neoliberalism as a turn away from the Keynesian settlement with the white working class in North Atlantic countries following a "crisis of inclusion" in the 1970s (2011: 375). After a series of social movements demanding the inclusion of various excluded groups into the benefits of capitalism, the state no longer provided economic security alongside political rights; wages stagnated, public services were sold into private hands, and inflation was controlled through massive cuts in public spending. In this "new dispensation", capital flows mysteriously from financial services rather than being related to the production or commerce of concrete things (ibid: 376).

Harvey defines neoliberalism as a type of state in which all human action is moved into the domain of the free market and economic policies centre on deregulation and privatisation (2005: 2-4). The obligations of what he calls the "neoliberal state" are reduced to guaranteeing the money supply and protecting private property, legal contracts, and personal safety (ibid: 2). This transformation of the role of the state is couched in terms of individual freedom and dignity. Harvey argues that neoliberalism now operates as a hegemonic mode of discourse that US imperial power pushes around the globe through coercion by international bodies such as the IMF enforcing structural adjustment in exchange for bailing out failing states and where that does not work, military intervention (ibid: 29). It was a way of restoring class power to the top 1% after 1970s economic crises (ibid: 16). The policies of the neoliberal state break the power of labour unions and enhance the power of capital. Like Graeber, Harvey also highlights the fictitiousness of financialisation, for example creating financial products and over-valuing their worth resulting in things like subprime mortgages, that have the effect of appearing to create money from nothing (ibid: 193). This creates an unstable system, its

contradictions cause persistent economic crises, such as the financial crash of 2008, and a broadening of US military interventions to prop up the system.

Wacquant modifies Harvey's thesis by emphasising the expansion of the state into the regulation and criminalisation of the lives of the poor (2009: 309). Deprived of social programmes that buffet them from the increased economic insecurity created by deregulation, the poor are increasingly managed through twin techniques of "workfare" and "prisonfare" (ibid: 287). The prison population greatly increased at the same time welfare was reduced in favour of enforced labour in precarious low-wage employment. This occurs because although the free market must prevail, personal behaviour in moral terms cannot be self-regulating. The withdrawal of the social welfare "nanny state" is replaced with the "daddy state" of carceral discipline (ibid: 289). For Wacquant, this is not a vague social trend or inherent characteristic of "late modernity" but a specific "transnational political project" by a new global ruling class (ibid: 305-306). He outlines a four-point definition of neoliberalism: economic deregulation; welfare state reduction; a "cultural trope of individual responsibility"; and an "expansive, intrusive, and proactive" prison apparatus (ibid: 307).

In spirituality, individual agency is reified as a transformative magical power that obscures social structural causation. Anyone can manifest what they want but only if it was meant to be; if it is meant to be that means they are following the energy of the universe and therefore more developed spiritually. Here is the tension between individual agency and providence, anyone can do anything but what they are meant to do is somehow predetermined. To me this was summed up in two common phrases I heard in Sedona: "everything happens for a reason" and "anything is possible". This tension is also in neoliberalism; the free market determines everything except moral behaviour which must be strictly regulated by the state.

In this chapter, I examine the working out of neoliberal policies through the spiritual paths of two young men I lived with in an off-grid homestead in Valle: Thom and Benito. Coming from low-income backgrounds with little formal education, their social position located them at the nexus of neoliberal policies of mass incarceration and reduction of social programs. They were the sort of people who would have once benefitted from Keynesian social provisions but instead found themselves marginalised

and criminalised. The idea of the spiritual path cloaked this structural change in the aura of individual agency; what they suffered was the result of their own poor choices and they had to follow the energy of the universe to return to their place of power. They were also positioned in a group excluded from economic globalisation, without the education or training to take part in the new economic opportunities offered by this shift, and with manufacturing jobs shipped overseas, they found themselves stripped "of their sense of entitlement to good jobs and the American dream" (Ong 2006: 26). The jobs left were in the new dominant working class occupation of food service or in short-term subcontractor employment in construction or transportation. Rather than accept this position, they moved off the grid to a place of near-total social marginalisation and isolation, as such accepting the logic of neoliberal policies that left them no place in society while interpreting this as their choice and a way to spiritual and material liberation.

The central intersection in Valle. Taken from the car park of the Flintstone's Campground; in the background, the motel and Chevron gas station

Valle is an unincorporated "census-designated place" in Coconino County, with 832 residents as of the 2010 census[63]. It sits at the intersection of highways 64 and 180, the nearest towns are Flagstaff 50 miles away to the southeast, Williams 40 miles to the southwest, and the South Rim of the Grand Canyon 30 miles to the north. Beyond the two highways, plots of land are connected only by dirt roads. Most plots are empty and undeveloped; the inhabited ones generally contain semi-permanent or temporary structures such as trailers, mobile homes, RVs, barns, tepees, and in one case a series of converted grain silos. The only amenities are located at the intersection; principally a gas station with a gift store and an adjoining motel, opposite is the Flintstones campground[64]. There is also a small airport and flight museum, a rock shop, two trading post-style gift stores, a hardware store, a set of storage units, and a general store that is now closed. Only the land around the intersection is on the electricity grid and postal service, extending to where the last billboards are located on each highway, about 3 miles in each direction from the intersection. Water is trucked in and can be purchased from the gas station, $1 for 50 gallons; the area is not connected to a well or mains water. There is no rubbish collection available.

From the people I met and observed, Valle residents were mostly middle aged and elderly, white, predominantly men, and either previously or currently employed in the military, law enforcement, or for the Parks Service. The campground itself was a local hub for people who lived there; the gas station being more often filled with tourists on their way to the Grand Canyon. Food was slightly cheaper at the campground store and there was propane for sale there as well. The diner offered 5¢ coffee with free refills. There was a shower at the campground that many locals used, if they did not have their own shower installed. It cost $1 for 5 minutes of hot water; the stalls were grimy and caked in lime scale and in the winter the women's shower room was locked

[63] http://www.census.gov/2010census/popmap/ipmtext.php?fl=04:0478855

[64] No one I spoke to was sure why the campground had a Flintstones theme. The best guess was maybe the owners thought Bedrock City was somewhere near the Grand Canyon. It has caught the attention of some internet travel writers who likened it to a post-apocalyptic wasteland https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/the-flinstones-amusement-park-is-depressing-and-amazing-bedrock-city ; http://www.roadsideamerica.com/story/11289

to save on costs.

Beyond the intersection it was mostly open land. The trailers that could be seen from the dirt road on closer inspection were often abandoned, left to the rats and rotting back into the ground. Thom and Benito said it was still "the Wild West" out there. There was little in the way of government presence; when a neighbour's mobile home burned down it took the fire department forty-five minutes to arrive, by which time it was completely destroyed except for a solitary angel statue standing beside the driveway. Looting was a recurrent problem in the area; as prevention neighbours got each other to watch their land whilst they were away. This occurred frequently, as Valle had a highly seasonal residency pattern, with many people only there in the summer or during hunting season, staying further south for the cold, harsh winter. Sitting at 6,000ft on a plateau that reached the Grand Canyon in the north, the weather in Valle was variable and often problematic. It was hot in the day, then cold at night, with heavy snow in the winter, and dry, scorching summers. There were monsoon rains at the end of summer to the beginning of autumn, and periodic wind storms, with winds reaching up to 50-60mph. Everyone I spoke to agreed it was hard living out in Valle. One of our neighbours told me that was the reason there were not many women out there, only a "tough lady" would be able to do it, and most did not want to. He said it was not a place to "meet girls". I saw other women more frequently around the stores on the intersection. Jasmine, who worked at the hardware store, told me she had moved up there with her husband; they preferred it to living in the city because it was cheaper with fewer nosy neighbours. She said that lots of people came out there to get away from it all, but then they found that their problems followed them. That made it hard to stay.

When I first started visiting Thom the land was not much more than a camp. It was an undeveloped acre, which had been previously foreclosed on and he had then purchased through a land realty agency on a rent to own scheme with payments of $150 a month. Rent to own schemes are notoriously bad value, yet are often the only available means of acquiring credit for the poor (Hill and Kozup 2007). A credit check is not required, and deposits are low; Thom's was only $200. The loan does not accrue interest. Instead each payment went towards paying a portion of the principal loan, which was $5,000 even though according to US Geological Survey GIS data the

undeveloped plots of land in the area were only worth $1500. The remainder of each payment went towards fees to the land realty company and taxes. Late payments incurred more fees, which were then taken out of the next payment, so it was conceivable to get in a situation where none of the principal loan was being paid off, only fees. The loan was taken out over a 5-year period, even if each payment was made on time the resulting amount paid would be $9000 for a piece of land worth $1500.

At first Thom pitched his tent on the land. There were no visible neighbours, as the land was overgrown with cedar trees and holly bushes. Later on we met Timmy, a veteran living in an RV who liked to play loud music and whoop and holler "freedom!" when it got dark. He had an acre at the end of the road. On the other side of us was Dale, who self-identified as a survivalist, someone who prepares for the imminent collapse of society through stockpiling weapons, food, and other survival essentials (Mitchell 2002; Lamy 1997; Toy 1986). We first met him standing on the road holding his AK-47 and looking out for looters. He had a few acres with an Airstream trailer on, surrounded with

The land from the east side. The barn, with the solar panels, wood pile, and blue jugs for water

razor wire and traps to keep people out during his frequent trips back to Texas; he was usually only there in the summer.

By the time I moved up there and during the eight months I lived there, a number of buildings were built or purchased. The main residence was a converted barn, also bought on a rent to own scheme, and a trailer purchased from a neighbour for $300, which Thom stripped of all its rotten fittings but had not yet rebuilt. His initial tent was then used for storage, until it was destroyed by a storm. Benito bought an RV that he lived in until he left. An altar and a sweat lodge were built for spiritual purposes. They also built a dog yard, chicken coop, several gardens for food, an outhouse, a fire pit, a hammock, and a tyre swing. The land seemed to be in a constant state of flux, they moved things around and changed things as they got new ideas and new resources. Everything moved around but like the sands in the desert it still looked the same on the surface.

The camp was oriented around the fire pit, which sat in the centre of a circular

The land from the north side. The yard with the fire pit in the centre, the barn, trailer, and chicken coop to the left.

cleared out area that they called “the yard”, with trees hemming in the edge of the land on all sides. There was no attempt to comply with county codes or acquire permits for the buildings or solar array. There were two 240W solar panels for electricity; before they were purchased small appliances were charged with one of the cars’ batteries using an inverter to transform DC current to AC. There was no ideological stance against technology; there was a profusion of consumer electronics including iPods, iPads, and laptops. A truck, a motorcycle, and two cars provided transport. Water was hauled in from Benito’s dad’s supply using first jugs then a large tank; his dad hauled water for a local firm so got his tank filled for free. The trash was burned or recycled, with some taken to the dump, although this was the least preferred means as it cost money. At first the only means of cleaning oneself was a bucket with water heated on the stove, then there was an outdoor shower tent with a battery powered pump and propane to heat the water, this was then upgraded to a converted RV shower in a standalone wooden stall. A fence was only built across the front of the property; it remains unfinished. A gate stands at the end of the row of fencing in front of the drive, with empty land open at the other side. The gate was of symbolic importance rather than a functional physical barrier; Thom claimed that the police could not just drive on to his property without a warrant if there was a gate. However, on the two occasions I witnessed the police come out to the land they did just drive directly onto his property and parked right beside the barn[65].

Inside the barn, a wood stove was used for heat and cooking, there was also a propane stove in the trailer and an outdoor barbecue. Thom and Benito cut wood either on the property or in the forests to burn in the stove. Coolers with ice were used for chilled goods, and then I bought a small fridge that intermittently ran off the solar. Washing dishes was my job, which I did at a sink removed from the trailer supported by workbench legs, using water from jugs, which was cold unless heated on the stove. The bathroom was an outhouse, which contained a big deep hole with a box over the top and a toilet seat; inside the hole specially added bacteria decomposed the waste. Laundry was taken to the launderettes in Williams or Flagstaff.

[65] The first time I saw the police come out it was to check that Thom was living there, as it was the address he had registered with them (see below); the second time Thom was arrested for failure to appear in court over a charge for leaving the scene of an accident. The charge was later dismissed when the plaintiff failed to appear for the court date.

The gate. Later the chain was replaced with a piece of green metal fencing.

Settling on the land was a process of territorialisation through organising and reorganising the relationships with the space being inhabited (Vannini and Taggart 2015: 181). This process was a way of making place from space (Tuan 1977; Lefebvre 1991). Thom would often refer to this process as separating the inside from the outside. When living in the tent, it had to be cleaned out regularly as dirt was brought in. When the central area was cleared the 'outside' was pushed beyond the boundary by removing brush and trees. When the fence was erected a human-created barrier partly marked the occupied space from the unoccupied acres surrounding it. This area was 'inside' because it was inhabited by humans and domestic animals, separated from the 'outside' populated by wild animals through a process of transforming the land and creating structures[66]. This was placemaking in the most tangible sense, creating human-occupied place from undeveloped space.

[66] The land was home to four humans and a number of animals that arrived at different times; two black Labradors, a pit-bull, two cats that gave birth to eight kittens in the spring, sixteen chickens, and five ducks. The inhabited space of the land was surrounded by wild animals including coyotes, elk, owls, mice, and rats.

Tuan attends to the ways human experience of the world is organised by dualistic concepts of which space and place is one of the most fundamental. While space implies freedom and the potential for movement and action, it is also a threat, an opening that renders vulnerability (Tuan 1977: 52-54). Placemaking closes off this opening, it defines it through adding values; "enclosed and humanized space is place" (ibid: 54). Thom's separating of the inside from the outside enacted specific, relative values to the land; dirt, trees, and wild animals all belonged to the realm of outside. Inside was the place for humans and domestic animals, marked by a level of cleanliness and order. The outside remained a threat, however, the dirt and the trees had to be continually expelled; open range cattle wandered in and ate plants. Yet it was through the constant movement of these elements back into the outside that the land became "an organized world of meaning" (ibid: 179).

The meaning of the land for both Thom and Benito was a place where they could follow their spiritual paths. Thom even went so far as to call the land a "commune", the members of which were figured as a family or "pack". The group he brought together attempted to work cooperatively with a shared vision and resources. They fit with Rebecca Neale Gould's characterisation of modern homesteading as motivated by a turn towards nature and an "extraecclesial quest for "the religious"" (2005: 9). Gould's modern homesteaders in New England pursued living off the land, following organic, vegetarian diets, and homeschooling as a "spiritual praxis" that centres nature "as a source of ultimate meaning and authority" (1999: 187). Nature takes the place of God or the church in structuring these spiritual quests; they move to the fringes of society in order to find a spiritual centre. They find meaning in leaving behind the consumerist, materialist, money-driven lives they previously pursued and found a transformational experience in nature. Thom and Benito similarly framed what they were doing as a centring of their lives on the spiritual experience of nature by moving out to the margins of society.

The outside/inside division must also be seen as a social relationship, one that is connected to class dynamics. Harvey reframes Lefebvre's argument that control over space is a form of social power to include the inequalities inherent in capitalism, which requires control over money and time as well as space (1990: 225). Spatial practices are

never neutral but imply some form of social struggle. In the case of housing, construction is uniform and expensive because of complex regulations surrounding building codes (Harvey 2014: 17-24). Buying a house requires taking out a loan. Thom and Benito were excluded from that because of their low incomes and poor credit scores; instead they constructed their own domicile. This was common in Valle, construction was diverse and cheap because building codes and regulations were not followed. Valle was in unincorporated land, meaning it was not part of a city or town, and the county supervisor's office was rumoured not to care what people built out there. This created a situation of housing closer to that of *favelas* or slums in developing countries than the norm in American urban areas (ibid: 17). Living on the margins therefore created freedom but also danger because they could build what they wanted but there was no guarantee that what they built would withstand the weather, accidents, or everyday wear and tear. This was demonstrated tragically during the house fire we witnessed; it was said to have been caused by an improperly installed wood stove that the owner had had fitted by a neighbour. The places built in Valle were not simply the product of the desires of those that lived there; many had few other options that they could afford. This is a result of neoliberal housing policies under which the state withdrew from housing provision for the poor gradually since the 1970s (ibid: 23). Valle and its hodgepodge of RVs, tents, trailers, and converted barns is a product of a political polity where adequate, safe housing is mandated by law but provided by private contractors that charge beyond what many can afford and where the poor are simultaneously denied access to credit to buy adequate housing and provision of social housing by the government.

The People on the Land: White Trash Hippies

Thom was the first person to live on the land, he paid the initial deposit and it was his idea to move up there. He was twenty-six when he decided to quit his job as a restaurant server in Tucson and move back to Northern Arizona. Born in Flagstaff, he was raised in Parks, a rural community thirty miles to the west down the I-40, in an off-grid house

with a generator for electricity and no running water. His parents divorced when he was two, he was raised by his mother who worked as a teacher, with two additional part-time jobs as a bartender and waitress. She was originally from Indiana; her family moved to Arizona in her youth, she grew up in Parks also in a house with no electricity or running water. His father was a retail store manager and ranch hand, who then received disability benefit for a back injury and numerous other medical problems. A born-again Baptist, Thom described him as a "tenth generation Arizona shitkicker"[67].

Benito and Thom called each other "brother" however they were not blood-related, Benito's father and Thom's mother had dated while their children were teenagers; Benito and Thom had grown up together. Thom had two brothers related by blood, one with the same parents, Jimmy, and the other with the same father. He described his background as "redneck" and "white trash", but now he thought of himself as more of a "hippie". According to Thom, "rednecks" were the type of people who wore head to toe beer merchandising and thought that was really cool. They drank the cheap and popular beer called Coors all day. When he called himself white trash, he explained this by saying that he grew up in a house with twenty cats and five dogs, no electricity or running water; he was "definitely white trash".

Redneck and white trash are racialised class distinctions the genealogies of which are intertwined with the historical construction of the social order in America (Wray 2006; Newitz and Wray 1997; Darling 2009; Hartigan 1992, 1997, 2005; Isenberg 2016). A 'redneck' refers to the red necks white labourers working outside in the sun were supposed to have. 'White trash' is a slur applied to white servants, or more broadly poor white people, since the antebellum period of slavery. Its very existence speaks to dominant ideas about race and class in America; being white implies privilege, whereas to be trash suggests a minority identity, so it has to be qualified with the modifier 'white'. To be poor is not to be fully 'white' in the American conflation of race and ethnicity with class (Ortner 1998). White poverty makes class visible (Ortner 2013: 191). By using these terms, Thom was locating his background in the marginalised rural American working-class.

[67] Shitkickers, in Thom's estimation, were guys who went around fixing fences and wrangling cattle, of generally low intelligence, lacking both basic literacy and teeth, yet for some reason "all the girls wanted them"

Hartigan's work on white trash as an "unpopular culture" outlines how initially it was a regional term in Appalachia and the South that denoted the margins of white society (1997: 320). It was applied pejoratively not to whole neighbourhoods or social groups but to individuals and families; those whose unruly habits and manner of dress marked them off as beyond the boundaries of proper white society. It was often applied by working class whites to other whites as a way of stigmatising them. The term was broadened to a national slang term that proliferated in popular culture from the 1980s to the extent that it became a self-identification, even a source of pride and authenticity (ibid: 317; Darling 2009). Hartigan explains how particularly in states such as California and Arizona, places without the longer historical associations of white trash such as West Virginia and Tennessee, "rootless whites" find the label to be a positive identifier that separates them from discourses of white privilege and hegemony (1997: 335). This can be seen at work in Thom's self-description of his background as white trash and also redneck; he was positioning himself socially while at the same time distancing himself from the negative associations by claiming that was an aspect of his upbringing and that he was now more of a "hippie". There was ambivalence about the term still; he did not use it in an unqualified positive sense. There was a murkiness about the way he positioned himself in class terms, at times describing himself as "white trash" and then at other time saying he was "lower middle class". This sense of confusion reflects discourses on class more widely in America; class is said to be made irrelevant by meritocracy, yet deterministic especially in terms of very high and very low incomes (Ortner 2003; Cobb and Sennett 1972; Ehrenreich 1989).

By claiming to be a hippie now and to have left his white trash, redneck background behind him, Thom was making a political statement. He did not espouse the beer-drinking, pro-hunting, socially conservative, politically right-wing values typically associated with being a redneck. It was also a denial of class determinism; he was white trash because he grew up in a home with no running water and no connection to the electrical grid, yet he was saying that while currently living in a home with no running water and no connection to the electrical grid. By saying he was now a hippie, he was claiming that his current circumstances were a choice. Even though he now lived as his mother once did, he was not disadvantaged because he was making a choice. By

asserting his individual agency, he was claiming the minimum level of success in American society; to live as he chose (Ortner 2003: 204-206). He was choosing to live that way because it was better spiritually and that was more important to him than material wealth. This claim obscured the many barriers he faced in accumulating any kind of material wealth.

Thom experienced a double-bind of social and economic marginalisation from a background of rural poverty complicated by entanglement in the criminal justice system. He had two felony convictions; he was previously on probation for three years, and had spent four months in county jail. A series of traffic violations led to a suspension of his driving license and he was unable to pay for its reinstatement for eight years. In rural Arizona, being unable to drive inhibits steady employment as the distances between places are too great to walk and there is little in the way of public transportation. Lacking much in the way of formal education[68], Thom was only able to find low-paid employment in food service and construction.

Prior to acquiring the land, Thom had been living with Benito in Tucson, a city in southern Arizona. Benito bailed on their house without notice, saying the energy just did not feel right anymore and he had to return to Sedona. Unable to pay the rent by himself, Thom did not want to look for another roommate and he was fed up with his job so he quit and moved north. He wanted to find a way to live without working for someone else; he felt that by living off the land he could do what he wanted. He had so much debt he could work for the rest of his life and never pay it back, including unpaid medical and utility bills, probation debt, student debt, and fines for traffic tickets. This debt meant that whenever he worked in formal employment his wages were garnished to repay it, reducing the amount of money he was able to earn. Thom felt that in Tucson he just worked to pay others, he hated it; he hated his life, working doubles in a "shitty restaurant" all week, paying most of it to bills and debts.

In leaving his job in Tucson, Thom was going directly against the received wisdom espoused by the rest of his biological family. His father, mother, and brother all emphasised the importance of work and denigrated Thom for leaving a job to do, in their

[68] Thom had his GED but did not graduate from high school. He had attended community college for a couple of semesters but he was unable to afford the tuition fees and textbooks required to complete a degree.

opinion, nothing. His brother Jimmy was the most critical of his choice. Jimmy continued to work in the same Indian restaurant that Thom had left, often for six or seven days a week. He left to work at another restaurant, a slightly more upmarket steakhouse, also in Tucson. This trajectory was considered "success" by himself, his girlfriend, and his mother. They often negatively contrasted Thom's decisions to Jimmy's. Jimmy saw his brother as lazy and incompetent, often saying derisively that "he needs to get his shit together", which meant he needed to get a job. Though he continued to work in low-wage labour without benefits such as sick pay or holiday pay, had no formal education beyond high school, and rented rather than owned his home, Jimmy considered himself no longer a "redneck". Thom's decision to leave Tucson and live in circumstances similar to those they grew up in seemed ridiculous to Jimmy; yet he also expressed some envy. Thom could do what he liked with his time, whereas Jimmy was still at the beck and call of his boss. Jimmy felt he had to work or else he could not provide for himself and his family. Thom had a form of freedom he did not.

Freedom for Thom meant freedom from the requirements of wage labour, the necessity of paying back debt, and the impositions of the criminal justice system. But he continued to suffer from the effects of poverty. They were inscribed on his body in the form of bad teeth, bad eyes, and a bad back. These problems were exacerbated by manual labour and left untreated because he had no access to healthcare, as he was unable to afford insurance until the Affordable Care Act (ACA) expanded Medicaid provision and he was able to get coverage in 2014. He had addressed these problems through self-medication with alcohol, prescription painkillers, and marijuana. This continued after he got health insurance; the habits had been inculcated in him from an early age. His family drank beer throughout the day but disdained the idea of ever visiting a doctor. Being white trash was not something that existed only in his past; it was embodied daily as "active marks of otherness...read on to ill-fitting white bodies" (Hartigan 1997: 319).

The strictures of the criminal justice system also continued to have a daily constricting effect on his life. The requirements of his probation had previously rendered him homeless for a short time. Many forms of employment and residential zones specifically exclude anyone with felony convictions. The specific felonies he had

required that he register an address with the local sheriff's department; failure to do so could mean arrest and further charges. So when he bought the piece of land and moved his tent on to it he was doing so through legal requirement, not just individual choice based on his spiritual path. These requirements are part of what Wacquant calls "prisonfare", which forms one side of the replacement of welfare under neoliberalism (2009: 287). The purpose of prisonfare is not to rehabilitate; it is to punish and monitor the "unruly poor" who no longer have access to social provisions that might mitigate the effects of precarious low-wage labour (ibid: 291). The other side is "workfare", the requirement to work in low-wage labour in order to access what few remaining welfare benefits remained (ibid: 288). Thom's felonies excluded him from any sort of public assistance beyond food stamps and after the passage of the ACA, Medicaid.

The legal and social structural restrictions Thom faced effectively kept him in place in the expanding American underclass. In the American class structure, it is easy to go down but very hard to move up (Tirado 2014: xxii). As discussed in previous chapters, spirituality offered a reinterpretation of stagnant social mobility; his lack of material wealth was a spiritual boon. It allowed him to connect more closely to nature. It allowed an inversion of his status as a social outsider. Harding relates how Christian fundamentalists in the US are the "repugnant cultural other"; the negation of the modern, rational subject (1991: 373). Wacquant applies her conceptualisation to those with Thom's legal status, existing on the margins of American society as "constitutively "aberrant"" individuals to be expurgated for the sake of the social order (2009: 215). Being white trash also marked Thom as an internal other, both part of the hegemonic social order through his whiteness but excluded from it by his poverty (Ortner 1998; Hartigan 1997). Thom's spirituality countered this marginalisation by situating himself as a sort of 'white primitive'.

The 'primitivism' of spirituality was a valorisation of premodern, 'tribal' peoples as superior *because* they were seen as the negation of modern, rational subjects (Geertz 2003: 38; Kuper 2005: 206). The fantasy of 'the primitive' never fully equates with the social reality of indigenous populations (Deloria 1998: 155-157; Aldred 2000). Yet poor rural whites and Native Americans occupy similar structural positions in relation to dominant society in the US, both existing on the margins socially, politically,

geographically, and economically. However, the 'red primitives' are idealised and romanticised and the 'white primitives' are not. People in Sedona spoke in glowing terms of reservation life without the polluting effects of modernity, but they never spoke this way about the white rural poor living in similar conditions in adjacent geographical areas. The Native Americans were others who could be romanticised as something better; people like Thom remained white trash. This complicated his own elaboration of spirituality, which he always differentiated from what he described as the "Sedona way" of doing spirituality.

When I asked him about spirituality, he told me it did not exist when you try to name it in the way people did in Sedona. It was not the same for everyone; uniformity was a product of trying to sell it and make a living from it. Previously he was a Christian, and had attended many different evangelical and Baptist churches in Flagstaff and Show Low, from low-key liberal churches to the kind where people fell down in the aisles shaking and speaking in tongues. As a teenager, he wanted to be a bible studies teacher or youth pastor. He liked to read, and described himself as "geeky" at school, with few friends. His drift away from Christianity came when he asked too many questions that his pastor could not answer. Now he said he was spiritual but not religious; he no longer followed a religion, Christianity could not answer his questions. He had a cross tattooed on his back which he got while he was still a practising Christian, but that now represented that Christianity was behind him, a part of his past. He found spirituality being homeless in the woods; he saw it in homeless shelters, in people offering help, in people changing because they were offered help. He told me he found God again through nature after he could no longer believe in Christianity. "All this", looking round and gesturing at the trees, the orange earth, the huge blue sky, was where he found God. The land was "a magical place" to him. He wanted to help people be happy and warm; he saw that as part of his vision of the land. The energy that was building around it, the people that were being pulled in, it was all spiritual for him. For him, the land we lived on was sacred; it was sacred to us and that was all it needed to be sacred. He said we all shared the same vision even though we had different parents and backgrounds; we came together to build this, our shared energy created it. We were like monks building a cult, he told me with a knowing smile, a monastic commune. This

land provided us with a safe place, somewhere we could always go, and we could offer it as a refuge to others if they needed it. It was a sanctuary.

This was another level to what Thom meant by the land providing freedom; it was a safe place that provided freedom from the homelessness that he had experienced before. Although it could be questioned how living in a tent on a piece of land he owned was so different from living in a tent on Forest Service land, for Thom there was a crucial difference; *he* owned it. He could not be moved along, harassed, or arrested for staying there. Property ownership was central to his conception of freedom and undergirded his understanding of spirituality too; it was only on land he owned that he could build his commune, create his sanctuary. This reflects a wider preoccupation in America with property ownership; it is important to own where you live, it is a source of self-worth and pride, a "symbol[s] of independence" in an individualistic and materialistic culture (Sennett 2003: 112)[69]. It is a status symbol, more salient as renting has become the norm for many working class and even middle class Americans. Sennett describes the efforts of working class men to buy property to be free then having to work fourteen hours a day to pay for this freedom (Cobb and Sennett 1972: 48). Yet it was traditionally a route to upwards social mobility; a route that has increasingly been closed off for many because of neoliberal policies that have resulted in stagnating wages and rising property prices (Harvey 2014: 24). All of Thom's family members, including his parents and grandparents, rented their homes. He considered owning his land a sign that he was doing better than they were; he had in a way advanced ahead of them. He had done this through aligning himself with the energy of the universe rather than participating in wage labour, which his family emphasised was the only way to get ahead. Owning land, even barren, off-grid land, was so important to Thom because it enhanced his social status; it was a way of regaining what he lost through his double marginalisation as a poverty-stricken felon. However, it was belied by a simple fact; he did not own his land. It was a rent-to-own scheme that if he failed to maintain payments on, he would have repossessed. Owning his land was a pleasant fiction to buttress his self-esteem.

[69] There is also a historical dimension to this. In the Revolutionary period, ownership of land by white men was "widespread" and being a landowner became part of what constituted citizenship and adult masculinity, see McWilliams 2005: 15.

The idea that he owned the tangible, material basis of his dwelling was an important part of his construction of sacrality. Its location was also fundamental to this construction; the land in Valle was part of a wider geographical area that he considered sacred. He believed there was powerful energy in this part of Northern Arizona. Inverting the common idea of people in Sedona, he claimed that Flagstaff was more powerful than Sedona. However, he was not talking about the towns as much as the geographical areas in which those towns were now situated. The canyons and the mountains made it powerful. This power emanated from the landscape. In a rhetorical move that distanced the newer spiritual migrants to Sedona from himself, he said that if you live here you benefit from that but if you grew up here you benefit from it even more because you had been exposed to it your whole life. He called himself "magical" because he had "old blood". This was a way of metaphorically evoking the connection he felt with the land rather than believing he had special powers. "Old blood" came from being born in a place with a long past. He said that I came from a place with so much history I probably had "really old blood". Being magical did not mean being able to do spells but rather it was a way of talking about his life, how things worked out for him without him trying to make anything happened; he used the land as an example of this. He moved there without any idea of how he would survive or make it work but somehow it had all come together and was thriving.

Even though he no longer considered himself a Christian, he still maintained a conception of God and said that he sometimes sat and talked to God. God for him was not the Christian idea though, but an immanence in all things, most potently the land, he said, "relating to the land is spirituality…it's part of being a part of everything". Through his conceptualisation of spirituality he invoked a deeper connection for himself to the energy of the place because he had grown up there, unlike people in Sedona who had moved there from somewhere else. He also claimed a power his relatives and others who laboured in low-wage jobs did not have; he benefitted from his magical old blood that allowed him to, at least symbolically, 'own' land, which they did not. Following his spiritual path was superior to working for wages and renting; it meant he could effortlessly thrive off-grid. His social and physical marginalisation was thus a source of strength and social status rather than a negative, limiting experience. He said he felt like

his powers were stronger up north, when he was in Tucson or other places it felt different, he felt like he recharged here, that his powers were at their peak because of the energy of this place and because he is from this place. Thom continually framed his mode of living as the result of his personal prowess, which was supported by the physical landscape.

Benito was the other main occupant of the land, he paid half the monthly payment with Thom and he considered himself a co-owner. This was a constant source of conflict between the two. Benito was often late getting the money for the land payment, incurring further late fees. Thom would often comment that he did not think Benito put as much effort into developing the land as he did. Benito felt that Thom often did not treat him as an equal, telling him what to do and criticising him when he tried to build things on his own. At twenty-four, Benito was the younger of two, and both he and Thom told me separately that Thom was the "alpha male" and Benito was his "sidekick". Benito said it was better to be number two, there was less pressure, but he seemed to continually react against Thom's attempts to lead while at the same time accepting it as inevitable. There was a hierarchical relationship between Thom and Benito, which, despite their consensus on their respective places in the hierarchy, was a constant source of tension between them.

Benito was born in Sedona at home. His mother was a nurse specialising in obstetrics, who lived in Austin, Texas. His father was a truck driver, living in Williams. They were never married. Benito described his mother as the "hippie black sheep" of a comfortably middle class family; his grandfather was a physics professor, and his aunts and uncles all had well paying jobs. Benito was raised in spirituality by his mother. She introduced him to fire spinning, which he spent much of his adolescence in Sedona pursuing (see chapter four). Soon after his expulsion from high school at age 14, he skipped off to Colorado and learned how to snowboard. He lived with his brother, Ezekiel, with whom he shared a mother but had different fathers.

After he came back from Colorado he had a car crash, in which he broke his collarbone. He received an $8000 settlement for this, which Thom, Jimmy, and he lived off for several months while working at the ski resort near Flagstaff. Soon after he moved to Tucson, which he described as a terrible job market, one of the worst he had

ever been in, the only saving grace was that apartments were cheap because no one wanted to live there. He moved there with Thom and Jimmy to live cheaply but then was unable find a decent job. Instead he worked a series of entry-level food service jobs where his income was reliant on tips from customers. He drank heavily because he said he had nothing else to do. To get himself out of this rut, he returned to Colorado, where he joined the Conservation Corps, which was closer to what he wanted to do with his life. A romantic relationship brought him back to Tucson, when that broke up he left and returned to Sedona because he felt that the energy in Tucson was holding him back, it was not allowing him to reach his full potential. This was more important to him than maintaining the apartment he rented with Thom, and he left owing Thom a month's rent.

In Sedona, Benito worked at a Mexican restaurant until he was fired. This prompted him to leave Sedona and move up to the land in Valle with Thom and me. At first he slept in his car, then he made a room at the back of the trailer in which he had a bed and kept his belongings in milk crates. During the winter, Thom crashed his truck and the insurance paid out a settlement to Benito because he was a passenger and had received a minor injury to his rib. He received $7000, with which he bought the RV. The following summer Benito left the land gradually, staying at his dad's in Williams more, because he had a job at a restaurant in Williams and could not pay for the extra gas to get back to the land. He took his RV to his dad's to refit it. The following spring he was hit by an oncoming vehicle whilst riding his motorcycle; his foot was crushed and he almost lost it. Following this, he went to stay in Sedona with his brother, Ezekiel. The driver that hit him was uninsured, an eventuality that was not covered by his own insurance, so he received no settlement as compensation or coverage for the extensive medical bills[70].

Benito described his path as following the energy of the universe, but in telling his story there seemed to be a consistent theme of chaos and precariousness. Wacquant argues that in neoliberalism social and economic structures are confounded in favour of emphasising the individual's responsibility for their circumstances, which increases the insecurity of the poor because the social safety is withdrawn (2009: 8-9). Insurance

[70] These were covered by his parents and Medicaid, which was available to him due to the ACA expansion.

settlements seemed to add to the sense of precariousness. A settlement can be a way to limit further financial responsibility of the insurance company and saddle the claimant with future expenses unforeseen at the time of the claim. This was the reason given by the insurance company for why they paid out $7000 for Benito's claim when his only injury was minor bruising to his rib; an injury which did not stop him from going snowboarding the next day. However, when he suffered a far more serious injury in his next vehicle accident he was left without any coverage because the driver responsible had no insurance and Benito's insurance did not cover damages caused by uninsured drivers. Like many low-income drivers, he chose a liability-only policy that provided the minimum level of coverage legally required but that had the lowest monthly payments. He also did not have the means to pursue the driver through the courts; he said that it would be a pointless expense since the guy clearly did not have any money. For the poor, insurance settlements can act as a redistributive mechanism in the legalistic social framework of America. Without a reliable social safety net, the law is one of their few routes to large sums of money to cover the effects of misfortune but it is not available on an equal basis. This reinforces the "the cultural trope of individual responsibility" because it is beholden on the individual to purchase adequate insurance and therefore buy into legal protection from the state via the courts (ibid: 307). Without the means to buy sufficient insurance coverage for himself, having an accident for Benito was analogous to gambling in slot machines; sometimes it paid out and sometimes it did not, overall he faced a net loss. Given the unpredictability that his economic circumstances engendered, spirituality became a way for him to understand and interpret precariousness created by neoliberal policies.

Benito made this clear to me when he explained that the key to spirituality for him was acceptance; of what was happening to him and the circumstances he lived in. Growing up in Sedona, he told me he saw many people trying to make spirituality into something it was not, instead of accepting how things were in the moment. Echoing Thom, he said that was usually because they wanted to make money off it. They tried to say they had the answer, when really it was something subtler than that, it was the way it felt to be in this area. Similar to Thom, he said that growing up in this area created as association between him and this "great place", which made life easier for him. He

claimed to lead a charmed existence because he lived there and because he was from there. He told me that at fourteen he had decided he would be lucky, and since you create your own reality and your thoughts set the frequency of what happens to you, he decided he would be a "badass" and get away with all kinds of "crazy shit", and that was what had happened. However, he felt he had lost the touch when he moved to Tucson and started drinking heavily (see chapter four). That was the point he identified as when his life stopped following a positive energy and started to go downhill. What was strange to me about their self-evaluation was that both Thom and Benito saw themselves as having fortunate lives, as being blessed by the special energy they perceived the area they grew up in as having. Yet to my cynical outsider perspective, they seemed to lead chaotic lives, blighted by limited financial resources, meagre employment opportunities, residential insecurity, random vehicle collisions, and alcoholism. When I first met them I characterised their lives as chaos, and saw it as a result of personal failings. On reflection, it seems instead to be a structural condition of poverty exacerbated by neoliberal policies that remove social provision for the poor.

It was these structural conditions that were completely denied by Thom and Benito; their focus on spirituality provided an alternative framework. A focus for Benito spiritually was to attend an annual Sun Dance ceremony, a recreation of the Plains Indian ritual in Texas (see Deloria 1998: 168-169; Wanica and Zelitch 1970; Lincoln 1994). The leaders were mostly Lakota, he told me, but most of the attendees were white. Although he admitted that he did not know for sure if they were Lakota that was just what he called them. His mother had been involved in Sundance first, and then introduced Ezekiel and him to it. Through this experience sweat lodges had become important to him spiritually; he and Thom built their own sweat lodge on the land for ritual use. Following the ceremony in 2014, he had been helping at vision quests as preparation for dancing in a Sun Dance, which he felt was the next direction for his spiritual path. It was through pursuing vision quests that he felt he would realign with the energy of the universe. He would create what he wanted from life through following the spiritual path that he viewed as trod by indigenous peoples, which he saw as closer spiritually to source. His primitivism was different to Thom's in that he did see indigenous peoples as spiritually and morally superior to those polluted by modernity.

The sweat lodge

An important factor in this was that Benito did not come from a 'white trash' background; his mother was white middle class and his father was of Mexican descent. He was closer to the position of the majority of my informants in Sedona in his attitude towards indigenous peoples.

Politically though, Benito was close to Thom. They were both critical of the government. Benito told me that the economy was failing and more people would have to turn to living as they did, growing their own food and being self-sufficient. It would become a necessity, but he also said that this would lead to a "homesteading renaissance". He said employment had changed so that it was not the case that people had the same employer for forty years, they had jobs on average two years. Most jobs that were available to him were not worth it, in his opinion. He said, "to just really live your truth, you don't need anything that society fucking tells you [that] you need. But once you start breaking down, society's like a fucking vulture. It tears you to pieces

because it wants you to be a part of it. It doesn't want you to know you can do better for yourself." Benito's own attempt to live beyond society and do better for himself was short lived. He left the land because he did not have enough money to stay comfortably, it was easier for him to stay at his dad's, and the constant friction between Thom and him made it difficult for him to pursue his own projects. Benito showed the most awareness of the structural conditions of poverty in which he was enmeshed; that the conditions of employment for the working class had changed to short-term, low wage occupations that provided few benefits (Wacquant 2009: 4-5). His criticism of the "vulture" of society could be stinging, yet he was not able to follow through on what he saw as the way to defeat the carrion-eater. He did not lead a self-sufficient life off-grid for long; he returned to waged labour. After I left the field, Benito moved back to Sedona, got married, had a baby, and as of 2017 worked as a window cleaner and Uber driver.

The young men who lived on the land had limited economic options. They were the sort of people, lacking educational qualifications and unskilled, who once would have been able to acquire well-paying jobs in the manufacturing sector, or in Arizona, ranching or mining. Since this sector has largely moved overseas and automated, the unskilled labour has moved into the service industry, and with so many people applying for the available jobs the companies in this sector, especially food service, can pay their employees pittance (Ehrenreich 2001). Neoliberal policies exacerbate this economic insecurity through removing social provision and increasing the carceral reach of the state (Wacquant 2009: 13:16; Harvey 2005: 2-3; Bourdieu 1998: 5-6). Dealing with the precariousness of neoliberalism on a daily basis, Thom and Benito found themselves working all hours to earn just enough to get by, enough to pay their rent and bills, but all they did was work in a job they did not want or enjoy. What was their life really about? They started looking for an alternative. What Thom created was an alternative to the cycle of poorly paid waged labour that barely paid the bills incurred living in the apartment they rented to get to the job they did not want. It was an alternative framed on a 'primitive' ideal of living on the land, something they connected to a level of higher spiritual development, even if it perhaps had more in common with Thom's 'white trash' roots than the ways of the Native Americans. Still, they interpreted what they

were doing spiritually. Thom talked about the energy of the place, the "magic" as he also termed it bringing people to the land. The bills were so low that it was easier to pay than the monthly overheads of an apartment or house, especially when pooling resources as they were. Being energy independent meant being free from the threat of disconnection for unpaid utility bills. All that was required to move out to the land was to build or buy a shelter and then they could maintain themselves on very little money, which they could earn in a way they wanted to rather than being forced to work in Subway.

That was at least the theory. Benito found himself unable to continue with the privations that living on the land involved. It was easier for him to live with his dad and go back to working for tips in a restaurant; then after he recovered from his accident, window cleaning and driving. Thom stayed out there, even when he was on his own after everyone else had left, out of both stubbornness and lack of alternatives, but he always said he was happy there. He said he lived "like a pharaoh"; free, without anyone telling him what to do. Freedom for Thom was constituted by happiness and peace not the ability to acquire money and things. He said it did not bother him that there were many material comforts he lacked. He was valuing the spiritual over the material. It was a way of living for those who rejected the American dream because it was unobtainable to them, but one which turned out to be unsustainable in practice.

Gardening and Living off the Land: the Unsustainability of Self-Sufficiency

Gardening was an important focus for Thom, and something that occupied much of his time and effort on the land. He set up a number of fenced in gardens with raised beds that grew vegetables and flowers. One of his stated aims when he first came to the land was to plant an organic garden and grow an abundance of food that he could give away for free to all his family and the people in the area. He said learning about gardening meant he could support himself and make money anywhere without recourse to waged labour. The first garden was located in a sunny clearing beyond the trailer. He and I built it in the summer of 2013 before I had moved up there full-time. I pulled bark off

downed trees and collected it in a bucket and piled it up beside him, as he created a raised bed, surrounded by rocks and sticks, containing dirt, cowpats, and humus from under the cedar trees that scattered the land. The cowpats were fertiliser; the humus also helped the plants grow. He continued to add more dirt and water to make the soil more fertile, working on it each day. The first vegetables planted were sunchokes and garlic. He bordered the bed with a chicken wire fence held up with rebar, and created a walkway with the bark. The aim was to set up the garden as a self-sustaining ecosystem, so animals would feed from the plants, then help fertilise the soil with their manure, and more plants would grow. Thom would be able to leave it alone and it would keep growing.

Thom's aim was to grow enough food to live on, but that was not achieved during the time I lived there. The first winter we only had garlic from the gardens, so the majority of the food we ate was bought from grocery stores in Flagstaff or Williams or the gas station in Valle, supplemented with food gifted from Benito's dad's garden (see chapter three). There were more vegetables grown over the following summer including courgettes, squash, spring onions, potatoes, peas, and beans. In the spring after we bought the chickens, we had eggs everyday, and meat from the occasional slaughtered duck. This was not enough to feed the people who lived on the land, let alone anyone else. The land was not self-sustaining, as Thom had envisioned it. Both he and Benito had to take up a variety of alternative forms of employment. During the winter they both worked at the Snowbowl, the ski resort on the San Francisco Peaks; Thom in the kitchen and Benito as a cashier in the canteen. They got paid minimum wage ($7.90 per hour), which did little more than pay for the gas to drive the eighty mile round trip to the mountain and back each day. They both said they worked there mainly for the free snowboarding pass staff members were given. This job ended with the ski season in March; however, both Thom and Benito quit a month or so prior to that.

Thom earned a little money looking after Dale's property, protecting it from looters and building a fence while he was not there. When Dale came in the summer he would give Thom $100-$200 for having kept an eye on it all winter. Benito got paid $10 an hour to help an old lady who lived near his dad paint her house, cut wood, and haul water; this amounted to around $20 every week or two weeks. In the summer, Thom

was able to get semi-regular work landscaping for holiday homes in Parks at $15 an hour for 2-3 hours every two weeks. He also did work trades and paid construction work for a man he knew in Williams. They were both accomplished fire spinners and put on a couple of performances that I saw, each time working for tips, which averaged $35 each for a performance. For a period while they had the truck, they went out to the national forests and cut and sold wood, the permits to cut wood were $20 for 4 cords and they could sell a cord for between $150-$200. I only saw them sell one cord of wood during the time I was there, for $220.

They spent their days when not out at work in the gardens or working on the trailer or the barn, whatever construction project was currently underway, more often than not drinking beer as they did so. The most significant sum of money came from the truck crash, when the insurance paid out $7000, double what I paid for the truck, plus an additional $7000 to Benito as a settlement for his injury[71]. It was this sum that allowed them to buy solar panels, the RV, and the TV. This sum and the financial contributions I made were crucial to their continued existence on the land. I also helped them make land payments and more often than not was the one who bought groceries. Benito and Thom spent most of the small amounts they earned from their varied jobs on gas and beer. If I had not been there it is unlikely that they would have been able to stay on the land as long as they did.

Despite their aims of living off the land and not working for anyone else, this proved difficult in practice. The soil was not fertile enough to produce large amounts of food without intensive investment of resources and labour. They did not have the resources to invest and they spent their time working outside of the land so they did not have the time to invest their labour significantly either. Their progress was often hampered by the excessive consumption of beer. Money was a continual problem, and the jobs they did find often did not provide enough for food, gas, beer, and the land payment. Most of these employment opportunities were short lived, as neither seemed to want to work for very long in any of the jobs they got. They wanted to stay on the land

[71] I bought the truck with the understanding Thom would pay me back for it eventually; he crashed it before then but because I had included it on the full coverage insurance that I had for my car, it paid out at what is known as the Kelly Blue Book value, a valuation based on the likely resale price. This was double what I paid for it because it was in very poor condition whereas the KBB assumes at least a 'fair' condition.

and do what they wanted, but were continually being pulled by necessity in other directions. Self-sufficiency and living beyond society was, despite their rhetoric, always a pipe dream. In practice their survival was serendipitous rather than ensured. Eventually Benito was not able to maintain himself there, although Thom would attribute this to his individual laziness rather than any structural factor. Despite the problems they experienced, Thom maintained his faith in the alternative he created; he still thought it was a better option than working in a low-paid food service job.

To the extent that they acknowledged their failure at self-sufficiency, they did not attribute it to any structural cause. Even though Benito railed against the "vulture" of society that claws back at those that try to escape it, he always blamed himself for being unable to maintain a life off-grid. He did not have his "shit together" and that was why he ultimately left. Thom concurred that Benito was lazy; he, on the other hand, had his powerful "magic" and "old blood", so he could stay there. He rarely acknowledged my input to his success. Both Thom and Benito reproduced what Wacquant calls the "cultural trope of individual responsibility" which he argues is one of the four "institutional logics" of neoliberalism (2009: 307). There is always a concrete entity at fault; individual responsibility is paramount. Poverty is not to blame, the individual poor are; their lack of resources and capital is due to character failings. Spirituality gave a revaluation of this framework; they lacked capital because they did not care for the work that was available to them, they lacked resources because they preferred to work on their spiritual paths rather than any career. Spirituality gave their lives value; they were not worthless because they were poor instead they were making a choice, and therefore exerting agency, by opting for the spiritual over the material. However, their access to material success was severely constrained by the other "institutional logics" that Wacquant outlines; "economic deregulation" robbed them of well-paying jobs available to the working class prior to neoliberalism; "welfare state devolution, retraction, and recomposition" withdrew the social safety net that could have militated against the economic precariousness driven by deregulation (with the notable exception of the ACA); and "an expansive, intrusive, and proactive penal apparatus" demanded that Thom maintain a fixed address and get a job when he moved into its clutches (ibid). The effect of these institutional logics was that even though they tried to live off the grid

they were constantly forced to participate to some extent in the formal economy.

Spirituality then became fundamental to how they constructed a sense of self-esteem and agency. Thom reinterpreted his physical and social marginalisation as freedom, which he further constituted as freedom to work as little as possible because spiritual development was more important to him than material wealth. He chose to live outside of society, even outside of permanent structures. He owned land, albeit over-valued and barren land, and this made him successful; unlike his brother, Jimmy, who considered himself successful because he moved from one restaurant job to another and was able to pay all his bills. Benito saw pursuing his vision quests and living off-grid as a route to success because it moved him beyond society's claws; his failure was his own as well, he could not maintain himself there because of his personal failings, not any broader structural reasons associated with poverty.

Spirituality reinforced the cultural trope of individual responsibility through its centring of the individual in the creation of reality. If everything that happens is chosen by the individual, then it is all a result of their agency and structural forces are obscured. Spirituality cast a cloak around neoliberalism. It also obscured the investment of kin networks; Thom and Benito were supported by Benito's father who gave them food and water; Benito was supported by his family after his accidents; but none of this was acknowledged in their talk of following the energy of the universe and creating their own realities. Success and failure both came from their individual agency.

Thom and Benito constructed their attempt to live off the land as an act of being outside, both outside physically and metaphorically outside of society. This involved a process of placemaking through which they defined the inside of their place from the outside space surrounding them. However, just as the mud and dirt of the outside was continually brought inside the tent and the barn, the requirements of society kept penetrating their attempt to stand beyond it. They still needed money, they still needed food, they still needed gas for their cars, and this involved them in various interactions with the society they claimed to live beyond. They were not self-sufficient, however this is a utopian desire. Vannini and Taggart found in their survey of Canadian off-grid households that being completely off the grid was never possible, there was always some form of societal infrastructure engaged with, most commonly the transportation

network (2015: 167). Benito and Thom's outsider status was a way of transforming their marginalised existence into a mark of honour; they were not poor rednecks with limited opportunities, they were homesteaders on the frontier. Unlike a number of Vannini and Taggart's informants, sustainability and environmentalism were not an important focus for Benito and Thom. Their movement off the grid and back to the land was more about anti-statism, poverty, and the individual pursuit of freedom and independence. However, like Vannini and Taggart's more middle class and better resourced Canadian informants, Thom and Benito wanted to "get away from a postmodern culture and neoliberal society that constantly spreads it tentacles farther and farther into private homes and personal lives through it seductive images of "the good life". A good life that is, unfortunately, also superficial, commodified, and unsustainable" (ibid: 198).

For Thom and Benito, spirituality was how they formulated their ideas about what constituted the good life. But it was never a systematic formulation. Some days they were magical, following the energy of the universe, and living their best lives; other days they just could not get their shit together. Precariousness and chaos remained a constant theme; born from the structural conditions of poverty that they rarely acknowledged. Spirituality was there, but it lacked a clear label, or as Thom once put it to me, "the problem with studying spirituality is that you're looking for something that both is and isn't real". It seemed he had a similar attitude to poverty. However, in comparing them to Vannini and Taggart's Canadian middle class informants, it seems unlikely had they had more resources that they would have had much more success at self-sufficiency. Neoliberalism extends into the lives of the middle and working classes alike, reducing their access to resources as it increases the wealth of the upper classes. It is, as Harvey argues, a form of class warfare restoring power to the elites at the expense of those who benefitted from the post-war Keynesian consensus (2005: 15). Spirituality mystifies these structural dynamics of class by reinforcing the cultural trope of individualism; by inverting social marginalisation as progress to a spiritual centre; by transforming the only life available to the criminalised and precarious poor into 'the good life'.

Conclusion

"They call it the American dream 'cause you gotta be asleep to believe it" – Daniel Holland, Sedona resident, Facebook status on Thanksgiving 2014

Peter stood alone in the middle of the plinth close to the top of Bell Rock. Surrounded by curious onlookers, fellow believers in the synchronous meaning of 11:11, and watchful police; he would be the only one to step through the portal should it appear. He was the saviour of this simulated reality. His belief system was told through his story; he was the central character. It was a belief system centred on an individual, although drawing on the cosmology of spirituality, quantum physics, and science fiction for inspiration, it was entirely self-focused. Peter's beliefs, his style of millenarianism, epitomise spirituality as the religion of individuals. What connections with others existed were not essential. Indeed, his belief system placed his feelings as the central concern; if any other thing created negative feelings, he would walk away from it, and his belief system justified this. It was a simulation based around him; the world was a projection of his consciousness. He chose everything that happened. So if he did not like something, he could choose something else. Most people laboured under the delusion that things existed outside the self that they had to cater to; this was the cause of human suffering according to Peter. Adversity was the result of poor choices.

In relating Peter's story in chapter one, I connected it to American autobiography, suggesting that Peter was embodying his autobiography through his narrative construction of reality. American autobiography's exemplar is, arguably, Benjamin Franklin's memoir (Couser 1989: 248). Franklin was the self-made man, who through his industriousness, frugality, and dedication progressed from being the fifteenth of seventeen children of an impoverished soap and candle maker to being a man of wealth, historical importance, political standing, and scientific achievement. His autobiography created a form well-worn in American cultural narratives; the rags to riches tale of assiduous economic and social improvement made possible by a meritocratic and democratic society. He is the American dream personified. If so, Peter is his obverse. Giving up hard work to please himself in leisure time, not caring about

any legacy of social improvement, denying the importance of the social in a belief system that acknowledges only the individual. He is the personification of the end of the American dream, or as he memorably called it, the American nightmare.

The individual is the alpha and omega in spirituality; every individual is Jesus; each is a god or goddess in their own universe. This religious system came to fruition, birthed from longer historical trajectories of western esotericism and millenarianism, alongside neoliberalism. A buzzword blamed for many of the current ills of American society, neoliberalism still provides a useful analytical delimitation of the political economic formation created by successive government policies in nations around the world of deregulation, financialisation, and privatisation since the early 1970s. Neoliberalism collapses the public into the private. Only the private exists, all resources are privately owned by private individuals and available for sale on the 'free market', in theory if not in practice.

This absorption of the public is spatial. Public space is incrementally sold off so that individuals can only congregate on private lands, paying whatever fee the owner chooses. Sedona had no central public space; only a couple of parks tucked away off side streets. Bisected by a five-lane highway, the town grew either side like a scattergraph. The parks could be visited at any time but given the heat of the Arizona sun it was often unpleasant to do so. I vividly remember in my first month in Sedona, August, trying to find a bench to sit down on to write my notes. It was too hot to want to be outside, and in any case, when I found a bench it was so hot to touch I was unable to sit on it. I relented and went to a nearby coffee shop, bought a drink, so I could sit inside the air conditioned environ. This is the effect of the absorption of public space; to exist in space is a privilege, a transaction must be entered with the owner of that space, it must be paid for. Valle was an even more extreme extension of this logic; there was no communal public space at all, the central point of the community was a gas station, the only other spaces to inhabit beyond a private residence were stores. These did not invite long visits, one came and completed a transaction and then left. It left very little space in which to build any sort of community at all. It was a collection of individuals inhabiting proximate parcels of land. There were no amenities to service these individuals, beyond

the highway. Valle is the spatialisation of neoliberalism; disconnected, atomised, the few amenities to be had required a private transaction between individuals.

Alongside the neoliberal absorption of public space develops spirituality with its deification of space as outlined in chapter two. The vortexes are the latest in the long American tradition of nature religion that flourished previously with transcendentalism. The instabilities of class that exist when nature is glorified are not incidental. The social is in transition, vulnerable, uncertain; nature persists, sublime and beatific, beyond the untrustworthy social. It provides something much more, much bigger, than the social. Yet it is a myth, a vanishing frontier. Wilderness as a concept did not exist until nature had been packaged in parks and reserves, separated off from everyday life. The divine dwells in nature most fully when the humans are no longer there.

There is then a balancing going on, perhaps, an opposition of forces. The brutality of an economic form based only on individuals and their private property balanced by a religious form based only on individuals and a transcendent notion of self. Graeber's theory of historical cycles outlines this contrapuntal motion for the last five thousand years, and the theoretical point seems to hold at least for the emergence of spirituality and neoliberalism since 1971 (2011: 214, 249). The self is the locus of spiritual development because of the primacy of private individuals interacting through market exchange. This means change is self-focused. Change the self to change society, which is the theory of the hundredth monkey. Foodways are the medium for social change, as suggested in chapter three, by restricting the diet ascetically, boundaries are drawn between the individual and the impure environment. The environment - which is perhaps the most enduring public space, the air, the water, the sky - can never be truly owned, never entirely commodified on the free market. As such it is deeply suspicious, threatening even. The environment is attacking the body of the individual. The individual cannot control the environment; only seal their corporeal boundaries through ascetic practice, denying the impurities of the social from harming the pure, private individual.

Religion is embodied because it is individual. The extent of the individual is corporeal, in chapter four, I styled this the "folded body", after Latour, which learns to be effectuated by the energy of the universe (2004: 204). 'Doing' spirituality is a matter

of embodied praxis, of learning through the body how to feel the energy, to read the signs of alignment, to listen to intuition, heart wisdom. This can only be truly achieved through the body and not through the chattering third dimensional monkey mind. Spirituality is practised individually; it is practised through and by the body.

The mind, the words it hears and the logic it follows is distrusted; it is a product of society. Benito at the end of chapter four powerfully condemned the "vulture" of society clawing back at the individual trying to achieve freedom through following the energy of the universe. The conspiracy theories of chapter five are theories about the malfeasance of the 'system' and the 'government'; both of which are collectivities. There is no notion of the public good to motivate such collectivities, they must therefore be acting for themselves, and against the individual, which they outnumber, and therefore, overwhelm. While this provides for an explanation of the cause of evil, it undermines the notion of collective benefit, leaving only individuals to fend for themselves.

The individual spiritual path is therefore discontinuous with the social. The process of awakening, related in chapter six, reorganises kin relations, ruptures economic ties, and separates the individual from the wider community. It is a solitary process. Starseeds are emblematic of this process because they see themselves as aliens, which is to say not-humans. They are alienated from the social, a feeling which for many preceded the awakening, which leads to an ambivalent narration of continuity and discontinuity, realisation and rupture, they are both reborn anew and finally how they always truly were. The conceptual relation between the alien and the human is important. The alien is the decontextualised human, in Graeber's sense of decontextualisation, how the slave is taken from their community, kin, culture, and made a commodity saleable in the commercial market (2011: 146). The alien is the private individual separated from the notion of the public, the social, the decontextualised human ready for sale on the market as waged labour. The individual alienated from the collective.

The social is threatening because of an experience of exclusion and marginalisation. Individuals walk their spiritual paths separate from social collectivities because, often, they already feel rejected by those collectivities. Thom was raised poor,

rural, ‘white trash’; he had little formal education; he came of age into jail, his adulthood clipped from the outset. These layers of social marginalisation led him to recoil from the company of others. He isolated himself in Valle because he was already isolated. He alienated himself because he was already alienated. Walking his individual spiritual path was easy; there was little chance for inclusion.

Compared to Thom, Peter had every social advantage. He was college educated, raised in an affluent middle class Jewish family in New York City, he had a successful career, children, property. Yet he did not continue to live the American dream. He ceased to strive for aspirational prosperity; instead he walked the same lonely road as Thom. Instead of trying to be a self-made man, he chose the best life possible, which he defined as the one he chose. This self-fulfilling prophecy, a justification of whatever happens is for the best for the reason that that was what happened, highlights the tension between providence and individual agency. Everything happens for a reason; the reason that the individual chose. Everything is for the best; the best is what the individual choses. This doubleness of being both preordained and freely chosen is not unique to spirituality, it is a feature of American religion more generally, but it comes through prominently in this particular case.

So to return to question in the introduction, whether spirituality is the Durkheimian cult of the individual, my answer is no. It is not a moral individualism so much as what Durkheim feared about modernity, egoism born from loneliness, anomie, and atomisation (2010 [1953]). This showed most starkly in any attempts at working as a group; the fire spinners in Sedona, the commune on the land in Valle; people got together and tried to share a vision, they tried to work together, relations broke down, everyone had their own ideas, everyone wanted to be the chief, someone left, then the next person, because they just had to do their own thing, they had to follow their own spiritual paths. Rather than the cult of the individual, it is more like individuals in their own personal cults, each one a leader without followers. Spirituality as a religion of individuals tried to overcome social dislocation; it proposes a utopia in the form the ‘new paradigm’, achieved through ascension beyond the third dimensional. This utopia is created by all individuals working separately on their unique spiritual paths. The cumulative effect will be a golden new age; unification with the oneness of the energy

of the universe. But utopia is a collective effort, it is a public good, and in neoliberalism, the public is rapidly disappearing. With each individual trying to individually save the collective through saving themselves, the social disappears into the self. There is no self because the self is all there is; the self is everything, and so at the same time, nothing.

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